

'SOFTLY, SOFTLY' CASEBOOK

Detective Chief Inspector Charles Barlow, Detective Sergeant John Watt and their almost equally well-known television colleagues, are here presented in story form in some of their most gripping, exciting and memorable cases. Culled from the files in Charlie Barlow's battered cabinet, they vividly exemplify the infinitely varied nature of police investigations: fraud, cash-grabs, sabotage, greed, lust, assassination, murder—all are part of the day's work to these dedicated men.

KNOCK, KNOCK! WHO'S THERE?

Johnny Bianda, who works for a Mafia-controlled organization, is a man who dreams of owning a boat which he can charter to the rich fishermen off the coast of Florida. To achieve this dream he steals \$186,000 belonging to the organization, although he realizes that they will eventually find and kill him. He decides that a year or so will be worth the risk so long as he can feel the rise and fall of a deck under his feet. When he later meets the sensually-exciting blonde, Fieda, he finds her a most willing accessory—but he is hauntingly aware that sooner or later there will be a knock on his door.

THE MANIPULATORS

A villainous scheme is devised to blackmail a CID officer into an alliance with the criminals he is out to break. Detective Sergeant Harry Dodson has spent the last twelve years fighting a tough and unequal battle with the denizens of the sleazy area of squalid streets known to the police as Dodson's Crotch. His hatred of the corruption and perversion generated there is the consuming passion of his solitary, spartan life. Then he meets the smooth but intelligent Wilfred Bradley, and is shaken to the core when Bradley produces photo-copied evidence of a long-ago misdemeanour of Dodson's sister that could wreck her life. Dodson believes he can handle Bradley, but that is the first of his mistakes.

**'SOFTLY, SOFTLY'
CASEBOOK**

Arnold Yarrow

★

**KNOCK, KNOCK!
WHO'S THERE?**

James Hadley Chase

★

THE MANIPULATORS

John Rossiter

**'Reserve For
Student**



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LONDON

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'SOFTLY, SOFTLY' CASEBOOK

Arnold Yarrow

*Based on television scripts by
Robert Barr, John Hopkins, Elwyn Jones,
Alan Plater and Allan Prior*

★

To the coppers who do it for real, including those many friends of *Z Cars* and *Softly, Softly* who, in pointing out the programmes' faults, have made no secret of their own, and in praising the programmes' virtues have modestly drawn attention to those qualities most praiseworthy in themselves

★

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author and publishers wish to express their thanks to the several copyright holders whose agreement has made possible this compilation of short stories to Troy Kennedy Martin as part copyright holder of the *Z Cars* format and originator of the characters of Barlow and Watt, to Elwyn Jones as originator of the *Task Force* format, and of various characters who feature in the *Softly, Softly* and *Softly, Softly Task Force* stories, to Robert Barr as originator of the character of Detective Constable Box, to the BBC for their agreement to the publication, and to the authors of the television scripts from which these short stories have been adapted Robert Barr, John Hopkins, Elwyn Jones, Alan Plater and Allan Prior (whose script 'See the Rabbit' was based upon a storyline by William A Roberts)

In addition to these formal acknowledgements, the author wishes to express his personal appreciation of the contributions of the many other people who have been involved with the television series for which these scripts were originally written administrators, directors, technicians, actors, so many, that it would take a volume to give adequate recognition to their individual contributions It is appreciated, though, that it was their collective efforts which made programmes so memorable as to be both worthy of adaptation and easy to adapt

There are some few who must be mentioned individually, not least of whom are the two actors whose team work has illuminated the Barlow/Watt partnership that provides a theme to this volume of stories Stratford Johns and Frank Windsor It is a considerable achievement for an actor to play the same character over a period of many years and still retain a freshness of approach That these two have succeeded in doing so may be due to the fact that

they always take their work seriously, but never solemnly. Among the unsung back-room workers there is one whose assistance on research and production played an important part in getting the first *Z Cars* programmes on the air and who is still watching over the *Softly, Softly* programmes with a keen regard – the present Script Editor, Joan Clark. The individual style of the programme was firmly established under its first producer, David Rose. And finally, there is the one person whose outstanding professional talent, matched with his concern for what the programme has to say, has maintained respect for *Softly, Softly* both as an entertainment and as a reflection of our times, and that is the present producer, Leonard Lewis.

The stories making up this selection were chosen for their insight into the Barlow/Watt partnership as well as being typical of the three areas of police operations in which they have been involved: Divisional crime operations in the two *Z Cars* stories, Regional Crime Squad operations in the three *Softly, Softly* stories, and County policing in the three *Softly, Softly Task Force* stories. In adapting them from the television scripts, the aim has been to combine memories of the original productions with the re-telling of eight entertaining and exciting tales.

A Y

PROLOGUE

Watt in Command

JOHN WATT came into the near empty room, slipping by the two stores men removing the last sticks of furniture. They were swivelling the top section of Barlow's massive great desk to get it through the doorway, hulking great piece it was, like Barlow himself, and like Barlow it was on the way out, while he John Watt was on the way in. He stood waiting with his head bent and his hands in his pockets until they'd got the piece of furniture up and away, their easy now mind the paintwork' echoing along the corridor, past the Chief Constable's room, and away to the nether regions of Kingley Hall where the lesser lights of Thamesford Constabulary got on with those bits and pieces that made up the whole of the functioning of a big Police Headquarters.

Up here in front, though, was where the leading lights hung out, the Chief Constable, the Deputy, two Assistants, and the Head of CID, the last of these being the lowest in rank, but having a special importance that put him on level pegging with Assistants and Deputy, and second only to the Chief himself. A big job, being Head of CID for a big Force like Thamesford, a big job, calling for a big man. For three years past it had been carried by a big man, Charlie Barlow, now Barlow was off, away to London, on attachment to Home Office, maybe for six months, maybe for two years, maybe for ever. But choose how long it would be, while he was away John Watt would be sitting in Barlow's chair. Only he didn't want it to be Charlie Barlow's chair, he wanted his own. That was why he'd ordered the room cleared, and put in a requisition for a set of office furnishings of his own choosing; not the heavy, traditional, mahogany and leather of Barlow's choice, but spare and functional like John Watt himself.

He looked round the panelled walls of the big room, relishing the feel of being there, of being in command, of knowing that whatever was done from now on would be done his way. And even as he thought of it, his head came up, his shoulders squared, and a quirky grin lifted the corners of his mouth. It felt good, by heck it did, being the boss man, after so many years of being Number Two to Charlie Barlow. Exciting years they had been, never a dull moment among them, but all through them it was Barlow out front and John Watt just behind his right elbow. Which wasn't a bad place to be considering, since no one questioned that in his way Charles Barlow was a champion thief-catcher, ay, and more

than that, a planner, a man of ideas, an old dog who never stopped learning new tricks For a young detective there was no better schooling than working under Charlie Barlow But John Watt's schooling days were over

The two stores men returned for the pedestal portions of Barlow's desk, flipping open the drawers first for a quick check to make sure that they were empty They were Barlow had cleared all his personal belongings the night before he left All except the one item that Watt had promised to take care of until Barlow could send for it It stood in an out-of-the-way corner of the room, a battered old filing cabinet, four drawers high, which Barlow had acquired in Wyvern from a station office that was being modernized In it were Barlow's private files, the dossiers of all the important or unusual cases that had come his way, with copies of the official records, and pages of notes in Barlow's own handwriting Many's the time he'd stood by it and said to Watt 'When I come to write my memoirs, John ' And why not! Every detective who'd been through the mill had come out the other end with enough of human nature ground into him to write five *Oliver Twists* and half a dozen *Crime and Punishments* It wasn't even a matter of getting the words down on paper they were all there

The stores men were back again, clearing the last few fittings from the room One of them rapped at the filing cabinet with his knuckles, and tugged at the locked drawers 'Not that,' Watt hastily told him 'That stays here' The fellow looked surprised Barlow had made such a thorough job of clearing everything else that he'd likely be wondering why this had been left John Watt could have told him and he felt a bit choked as he thought about it that Barlow's departure for the sanctified corridors of Whitehall had its doleful side It had been a rough time for Barlow There was Mrs Barlow killed in that stinking motorway pile-up which Barlow himself was lucky to get out of alive, there was the disappointment of being turned down as an applicant for the senior command course and knowing that the top rungs of the police service ladder would stay out of his reach, there'd been the railroading into the Home Office job which he wasn't all that keen on, and going along with it, there'd been the selling up of his house in Thamesford and the wearying search for somewhere suitable to live in London

'I'll send for this when I'm settled,' he'd told John Watt And then, with a mischievous grin, he'd fished out his bunch of keys, unhooked the one that belonged to the filing cabinet, and handed it to Watt 'Just in case there's any need to open it up, John', knowing damn well that there wouldn't be Well, greater love hath no man than to trust his memoirs to his friend But that was what it had all been about over the years they'd worked together

trust There'd been quarrels, there'd been fierce differences, there'd been times when Watt felt that he could cheerfully strangle his boss, but always, even at the worst times, there'd been trust between them

Ay, and the differences, the quarrels, had nearly always been over these very cases that now nestled in the filing cabinet The tougher the problem, the more likely it was that two fellows with strong ideas of their own would see different ways of tackling them It was easy enough dealing with a villain who shoved a brick through a tobacconist's window and ran slap-bang into a night-bobby with a fistful of Havanas, or knocking off a fellow trying to flog a second-hand Rembrandt round the back of the National Gallery, it was when there was no evidence, too many suspects, and sometimes only the whiff of a crime that the going got rough

There'd be more than a few rough ones in the cabinet Watt got the key out of his pocket and tossed it up and down in the palm of his hand Well, why not? Just a look, just to freshen his memory, just a reminder of the long, slogging years Barlow had said, '... if there's any need' Watt slipped the key in the lock and turned it The top drawer was jammed tight with buff-colour files, so many of them that the ones that had been there longest refused to part to make way for the newest arrivals which were tucked down the sides or just left lying on top Watt looked at a few of the names on the tabs Harrison, Posthwaite, Grange, Peak, Tarn. He remembered them all, vividly They were all murder investigations Had there really been this many? One whole drawer full of the sad sick record of human weakness, and greed, and all too often nasty crawling lust He closed the drawer again The time to look through those was with a bottle of whisky close at hand

He passed his hand over the second and third drawers and went to the bottom one, do it properly, from the bottom up, like a housebreaker who doesn't want to waste time closing the drawers he's already been through The files in the bottom drawer were newer and less tattered, Watt immediately recognized, from the different coloured tabs on the edges, that these were the Thamesford files Ay, they'd got some real system going by this time, keeping up with the ever-increasing sophistication of crime The red tabs were cash grabs, the blue tabs, fraud cases, but what was that red, white and blue one? He squinted at the legend on the edge of the file and remembered it at once It was the time they'd been given the task of protecting that visiting Yankee Senator It was a wonder that Barlow hadn't tabbed the file with the Stars and Stripes

The files in the next drawer up were fewer and thicker, and squeezed in between the pages of notes and statements were lots of photographs Watt pulled up one photo that was stuck out a bit,

it was a fellow with a window cleaner's ladder and another with a carpenter's satchel talking together just round the corner from a bank, both of them full of brass-necked confidence that no one could see them at it Watt remembered taking that snapshot himself from the dry-cleaning van they were using for undercover work at the time These were the Regional Crime Squad files, the Wyvern files, each one the accumulation of months and even years of hush-hush observation of top villains Well, even if it hadn't put them all behind bars, it had made Watt into a pretty dab hand with a camera

He opened the third drawer up The files in this drawer were stacked every which way, some of them in bundles tied with string, some loose and half-spilling their contents The front page of a newspaper hung out of one, yellowing and tattered at the edges 'North Eastern Echo', Watt read across the top, and underneath was a photo of him and Barlow standing all stiff and starchy by a graveside That was when the young foot bobby had been shot by a villain dodging arrest, and Barlow had raised Cain with the powers that be to give his lads the means of moving fast and staying safe And them at Headquarters had said 'yes, all right' and given Newtown Division their own Z Cars These would be the Newtown files, then, from the hurly-burly days of the docks and the slums and the new housing estates, when Barlow was a mere Chief Inspector and John Watt was a young detective with a voracious appetite for work that had just brought him his promotion to sergeant and lost him a wife Well, maybe he had worked too hard and neglected to spend enough time with her, and maybe she'd been right to walk out on him the way she did, but, by God, there'd been some work to get through in those days Wasn't a night went by that didn't bring its quota of break-ins, thumpings, thievings, ay and worse Short, sharp cases, most of them, settled in magistrates' courts the next day and forgotten the day after But there were some that stuck in the memory John Watt riffled through the files and plucked out one or two that bore names upon them which began to tickle the corners of his mind He carried them over to the window recess where he perched himself upon the shelves that now stood emptied of Barlow's gear And there, in the peace and tranquillity of the trim lawns that fronted his new office, he opened the first file and let his reading carry him back to the turmoil of his early days

Big Catch

(from the television script by Allan Prior)

THERE WERE ALWAYS fights going on around Mersey Way. Personal animosities and public prejudices would erupt with sudden violence, and then as suddenly ebb away, leaving a jetsam of injured parties, most of whom would vehemently deny that they'd been the victims of anything more violent than a collision with a lamp-post. You couldn't stop certain parties from fighting: husbands and wives, rival darts teams, even north shore and south shore. The next best thing to do was to try keeping them apart.

Of all the lots that did strike sparks off each other there were no two lots worse than the whalers and the dockers. The dockers were there all the time, but fortunately the whalers only came into port once every blue moon. Norwegians they were, hard men from the north, bringing their catch into Seaport after sometimes as long as six months afloat on a dry ship. And as soon as they were paid off, and before they lit out for a spot of shore leave back home in Norway, they were all set for one rip-roaring binge, and where else would they have it but on John Watt and Charlie Barlow's patch.

And it wasn't only the brawling with the dockers that Watt and Barlow had to watch out for, they were just as hard-pushed protecting the whalers from their own thickheadedness. They'd come streaming off their ship, pockets bulging with a good bit of their three, four or five months' back pay, hundreds of pounds apiece, give or take a bob or two, and every thief, pimp or tart within striking distance of Seaport would be down on the dockside ready, willing and more than able to help the whalers blue their hard-earned gravy. The whalers themselves didn't seem to mind so much as long as they enjoyed the spending of it. But their Consul took a dim view, and what he said made an impression on the top brass who made their impression on Barlow, and he in turn impressed on John Watt that he would view with extreme disfavour any continued robbing of the whalers.

So all in all it was, as John Watt recalled, with some apprehension that he would read in 'The Shipping Gazette' of the arrival of yet another whaling ship. Trouble was, that if he knew about it in advance, so would all the vultures. Which was why, on this occasion, he was remembering from the file, he'd thought he was being clever in using his new Z Cars teams to shift around a bit and spot the vultures before they landed. Only the Z Cars boys had not had too much experience of handling situations of that kind. He'd

started off two of them, Jock Weir and Fancy Smith, at Seaport Station, taking note of who was coming in off the Manchester train. When he went down there himself to see how they were getting on, he'd found them sitting in the Crime Car parked in the station yard, looking about as useful as two spare bollards without a rope between them.

'What are you two up to?' he demanded. 'Admiring the scenery?'

Jock Weir jerked a thumb at Fancy Smith. 'He's near wore his eyes out admiring it.'

Fancy, who was craning his neck out of the car window for a last glimpse of a wiggling behind, murmured, 'Look at that one. Fancy being five months at sea and that sailing across your bows.'

Jock reminded him of what they were there for. 'Those poor whalers have got to be protected.'

'They won't thank us for it.'

'That's not our business. They work night and day down in the Antarctic and save their money.' Jock's Calvinistic righteousness came to the surface. 'No Manchester tart is stealing it from them while I'm about.'

Fancy's sympathies were clearly with the tarts. 'Any woman who can take brass from a Norwegian when he's got two bottles of whisky inside him needs some nerve. I'd rather tackle a tiger with me bare hands.'

John Watt had had enough of their chat. 'Pay heed, you two. We've been told by their Consulate the ship is paying them off with only ten pounds tonight and the rest when they get home.'

Fancy looked relieved. 'Save us a lot of trouble, will that?'

'But...' Watt went on. 'If a chap asks for all his money in cash, he gets it. And some will ask, you can bet on that.'

Jock Weir sighed.

'What do you want us to do, Sergeant Watt?'

Watt spelled it out. 'You know the Magga Dan, the pub they always use, get in there amongst them, and not in uniform. Keep an eye on the girls. If any of them step out of line, warn them once. Just once. You've just seen the professionals from Manchester, they can take a warning. It's the amateurs that cause the trouble. And talking of trouble...'

They all three took a deep breath, and let it go with varying degrees of intensity.

'Talking of trouble, there's the dockers.'

'Ay.'

'You both know Big Des. He's their Number One troublemaker. If he turns up at the Magga causing trouble, knock him off.'

'Right.'

'And whatever happens, don't mix it alone, you're not heroes.'

First sign of fists flying, get outside and blow your whistle And remember

They both answered in chorus, 'Yes, sergeant'

'Those sailors are due on a bus for Newcastle first thing tomorrow I want them on it with some of their wages left'

Jock and Fancy got themselves into plain clothes and went along to the Magga Dan just before opening time John Watt came across them, standing in a doorway at the rear of the pub

'Not gone in yet?' he demanded

Jock explained 'We went in before and had a word with Toddy' Toddy was the publican 'Told him that we'll be around this night instead of the beat bobbies, they're too well known We came out again to slip in with the crowd so's not to be conspicuous'

Watt looked at the pair of them He couldn't imagine a couple of coppers less inconspicuous than these two Jock shifted uncomfortably under his look

'I feel queer without me uniform on'

'You're not naked, lad,' Watt said reassuringly

Fancy squared his thick shoulders and offered Jock a bit of advice 'Just look like a civilian in there, and not like a copper pounding a beat between the saloon bar and the public'

'You can talk!' Jock regarded Fancy sourly 'You eat, drink and walk like a copper The only thing you haven't got is a little blue lamp coming out of your head with "Police" blinking on it'

Fancy felt the top of his head as a big fellow came round the corner wearing a docker's short blue coat and a flat cap, a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles sat themselves in the middle of his large, round, benevolent looking face It was a long while since Watt had been taken in by that benevolent look, and the lesson he learned that time was one he'd never forgotten The big fellow was Big Des, and Big Des was a slugger Never mind why or what for, given a pint inside him Big Des would lash out And if there was one fellow that Big Des enjoyed lashing out at more than any other, it was a whaler There'd be more trouble than enough if he got loose among the twenty or thirty whalers crowding round the door of the Magga Dan waiting for opening time Watt thought best to give him a warning

'Hullo, Des. Where are you off to?'

'Hullo, Sergeant Watt I'm going home from me work' And he added innocently, 'I live down here, y'know'

Watt held him with a steady look 'Keep out of the Magga tonight, Des Or I warn you, I'll knock you off'

Big Des protested 'I can't drink tonight I'm broke'

The noise from the whalers, holding out the last few minutes to opening time, was ear-splitting Big Des squinted round the corner

at them 'Ruddy whalers' I've got to stay out of my own pub for them?'

'Go somewhere else tonight,' Watt told him

Des suggested craftily, 'You give me the price of a pint and I will'

'What do you think I am?' John Watt demanded 'A Sergeant in the Salvation Army? On your way, your tea's getting cold'

Des pushed his specs up on his nose and ambled off, spilling his benevolent smile upon the noisy whalers as he passed by them

'You want to watch for that finger,' Watt told the two lads 'If he shows up again, ring for help'

Jock and Fancy nodded The back door of the pub opened a fraction and Toddy cautiously looked out Two young women ran across the street to the open door on tottering high heels One of them was too fat and the other too thin, but they both looked good enough to Fancy Smith for him to breathe an 'Ee-ee' through his clenched teeth

The plump one asked Toddy, 'Can you let us in, love? There's a crowd like the cup final at your front door'

Toddy hesitated But it was only seconds off opening time 'All right' He pulled the door wide open 'It's Gloria, isn't it?'

The plump young woman nodded 'You've got a smashing memory'

Toddy told her, 'I remember you got yourself nicked last time we had the whalers in, for being drunk and disorderly'

Gloria airily dismissed it 'A mistake was that'

'Well, don't make any mistakes tonight,' Toddy warned her And he let slip a sidelong glance at the nearby coppers 'Behave yourselves, eh?'

'When didn't we?' said Gloria 'We're just a couple of girls from Salford, come up to this lovely tourist resort for us holidays'

'With pay,' said the other girl emphatically

A third young woman rounded the street corner and hesitated as she saw the little gathering at the back door of the pub She looked different, this one, not so flashily dressed or heavily made up, though it was evident that the clothes she was wearing were something fancier than the average girl round those parts would wear for every day A pretty young woman she was, who'd look even prettier if she'd let herself go with a smile As it was, there was anxiety written all over her as she drew herself together and walked on resolutely to Toddy's back door

'Can I come in this way?' she asked him 'There's a big crowd at the front'

'This leads to the long bar,' he told her 'There's a ladies only bar round the other side'

'I know,' she said But she didn't turn away

Toddy looked hard at her 'We're expecting to get a bit busy in the long bar The whalers are in'

Again she said, 'I know' But still she made no move to turn away

Gloria looked her up and down 'Do we know you, dear?'

'No,' said the girl

Gloria shrugged, and she and her mate teetered in through the back door The other girl would have followed, but Toddy barred her way 'I'm sorry, lass, but on a night like this I'd not like to see you in the long bar' He waited until she'd gone round the corner to the 'Ladies Only' bar, then he fastened open the back door and went inside

'That'll be it,' said John Watt to the two lads 'He'll be opening the front door next and it'll be every man for himself You hang on a bit and then take yourselves in, and not both together, one at a time'

'What about you, Sergeant Watt?' Fancy asked him

'Me?' He twitched the corner of his mouth 'I'm clearing off out of it before battle commences'

Watt thrust his hands in his pockets and walked off round the corner of the pub. The whalers were thumping rhythmically on the mahogany panels of the front door, chanting something which could have been for aught that Watt could tell an old Icelandic saga Whatever it was, it sounded as though it might have lots of blood and battleaxes in it Through the etched glass Victorian windows of the long bar, Watt could see the three barmen in their long aprons, their shirt sleeves rolled up nearly to the shoulders, standing behind the twenty-foot counter piled three deep with ready poured pint-jars of ale and doubles of whisky Toddy was wagging an admonitory finger at his barmen to which they were nodding their vigorous agreement Toddy looked up at the clock which had already slipped past the hour of opening, and heaved a sigh of despair at being unable to defer the fatal moment any longer He walked towards the front door and was lost to sight behind it, but the whalers evidently heard him drawing the bolts on the other side for they set up a cheer that could have been heard across to Birkenhead As the door swung open, they surged across the threshold like an Arctic tide bearing upon its crest a pack of blond-headed icebergs Within a second or so the last one was inside, and the walls of the pub began to quiver with the noise Watt wrinkled his brow, there'd be some ale supped tonight, it was only to be hoped that there'd be no broken heads or empty pockets by the morning, if there were, he'd have to answer for it to Barlow; and he'd make damn sure that Jock and Fancy in their turn would have a rough time of it answering to him

Jock was first in It was only a few minutes after the whalers had

suinged up to the bar counter, but most of the ready filled glasses had been whipped away and the empties were being slammed down for re-filling

'Take it easy,' Toddy was imploring one of the whalers 'There's all night ahead'

The whaler was a big fellow with reddish-blond hair. He stood beaming at Toddy, waving a fistful of bank notes under his nose. They were mostly fivers, with only a few oncers among them. Jock reckoned there'd be over a hundred quid in the fellow's hand and a lot more bulging out of his top pocket. It was a hell of a lot of money. Still it was a hell of a lot of work the fellow had done to earn it.

'Five month on whaler,' he was telling Toddy.

'Wouldn't get me on for five days, lad,' Toddy responded.

'All the time, rudda cold, I tell you. Rudda cold and no drink.' He lifted three of the whisky doubles, one after the other, and downed each of them in a single gulp. Then he beamed at Toddy. 'Good. Now good. Very warm. Good to be warm, eh?'

'Take it slow,' Toddy begged him.

'Five rudda month slow, I tell you. Now, fast.' He downed another double and asked Toddy, 'How much?' Before Toddy could answer, he pulled a fiver from the fistful of notes and thrust it across the counter. 'That okay? Yais?'

'That's a fiver,' Toddy made it clear by holding up his fingers. 'Five pounds.'

The sandy-haired whaler nodded back happily. 'Oh Yais.'

Toddy shook his head. 'I'll have one of those.' He pulled a single pound note from the fellow's grasp and gave him some change. Jock nodded approvingly. Further along the counter, Gloria cast a calculating eye on the whaler's wad of notes. 'You want to look after that lot,' she advised him.

Toddy didn't wait for her to suggest how the money could best be looked after. He suggested to the whaler himself, 'You give it to me. I'll put it in the safe till morning.'

Gloria's eyes glittered. 'Don't you listen to him, love.' She took the whaler's arm. 'It's your money, you spend it how you like.'

Jock Weir put his glass down. It had started already. He'd have to warn her. Once only, Sergeant Watt had said. Toddy, seeing the copper's starchy look, hastily warned Gloria himself. 'I told you before. behave yourself.'

Gloria pursed her lips and hung on to the whaler's arm. He shook off her grasp. Whatever he was wanting, apart from drink, it was obvious that Gloria hadn't got it. He gave Toddy several more notes from the fistful and told him, 'You keep serving drinks. Tell me when money finish, eh?'

The other girl who had come in with Gloria edged up to him.

If he didn't like them plump, perhaps he liked them lean 'What about a drink for a good little girl?' she demanded

The whaler nodded affably 'Okay Give it her I pay'

Gloria chipped in, 'What about one for me, sailor?'

He nodded again 'I buy you drink If you are also good girl'

'I'm always a good girl,' she assured him

'By golly,' he thumped his fist on the counter, 'If I buy you drink, you better be'

He roared with laughter as his own joke The two girls joined in But as he piled some drinks on a tray and turned away from the counter, they eyed each other warily Which one was it to be? The whaler had no doubt in his mind He wasn't interested in either They shrugged it off as he elbowed his way past them. There were plenty more whalers in the bar

Fancy Smith, coming in a few minutes after Jock, collided with the quiet girl who'd been sent off by Toddy to the ladies' bar She'd evidently got tired of being a lady and was looking for a bit more fun in the long bar But having gone in there, she shrank back from the hullabaloo and parked herself at a table in the corner Fancy got himself a pint of ale and wedged his back against a partition nearby The sandy-haired whaler came plunging through the crowd, his tray of drinks held so high that it almost crashed into the chandelier He stopped in front of the quiet girl and gave her a little bow

'I sit here You don't mind?' he asked

She looked up at him, pale-faced, big-eyed, not a hint of a come on smile 'I don't mind'

He leaned over to put his tray of drinks on the table, and as he did so the wad of money fell from his top pocket without his being aware of it The quiet girl quietly reached down and quietly picked it up Fancy stiffened The girl put the wad of notes down on the table 'You lost your money,' she said to the whaler

He looked at the money, unbelievably, then picked it up and stuffed it back into his pocket 'Thank you I see we got one honest girl in this place, yais?' He pushed a drink across

She gave him the whisper of a smile and a 'Thank you' as she took a sip from the glass and then asked him, 'What's your name?'

'Nils Ahlsonn Best harpoon gunner in the Antarctic'

'Nils Ahlsonn' She savoured the sound of the words He nodded happily at her pronunciation 'Yais What is your name, please?'

She looked away 'Does it matter?'

He would have pressed her for an answer, but at that moment the pub pianist, who'd entertained the whalers many times before, struck up a tune which they had taught him The whalers responded with appreciative cheers, roaring out the words of the

song, thumping their glasses on the table, and embracing everyone in arm's reach with delighted good humour. A big bearded whaler sitting next to the quiet girl put his arm around her. Nils Ahlsonn just looked at him. The bearded man took his arm away and slid off to find his company elsewhere. Whoever Nils Ahlsonn might be it was evident that he was both feared and respected by his mates.

The bearded whaler, watched by Nils, grabbed Gloria's skinny friend in a bear-hug. She squealed with delight and kicked her heels up in the air. Nils turned away to the quiet girl. 'You are not like these others. You nice girl, eh?'

The quiet girl smiled and nodded. But a look of near panic came into her eyes as the pianist changed his tune in answer to the demand of a group of dockers who'd gathered themselves into a grumpy knot at the far end of the bar. It was their town, their pub, their pianist even, yet here were those lousy foreign whalers moving in, crowding them out, and drowning every bit of decent Scouse chat with their heathenish singing. Well, the Scouse had got a song or two of their own, if you don't mind, and the one they'd insisted on was 'Maggie Mae'.

'Oh, Maggie Maggie, Mae

'They have taken her away' they bellowed out in aggressive unison.

Nils was puzzled by the girl's reaction to the singing. 'You not like this song?' he asked her.

She forced a smile at him. 'Yes. Very nice.'

He beamed back at her, he liked her even better when she smiled. 'What is your name, nice girl?'

'Margaret,' she told him.

He struggled with the unfamiliar syllables. 'Mar-gar. I cannot say it. Mar-gar.'

'Call me Maggie,' she said.

Nils chortled with delight. 'Ah. That I can say. Maggie.' He stood up, gave her a formal bow, and offered her his hand. 'Hello, Maggie.'

She took his outstretched hand. They stayed frozen for a moment of time, their hands lightly clasped, two quiet people in a maelstrom of noise. Their stillness caught the eye of Jock Weir. He wondered who the girl was. He couldn't make out where she fitted in. 'Who's the mystery?' he asked the publican.

Toddy looked across at the quiet girl. 'That's just what she is a mystery. I've never seen her before.'

'Amateur?'

'How do I know?'

Jock was puzzled. Could it be that she knew the sandy-haired whaler? Girl friend? Family friend? True, she hadn't come there

with him, because Jock had seen her on her own at the back door. But maybe she'd come there to meet him. He suggested to Toddy, 'She and that fellow who was spilling his money about . . . they seem to be something to each other.'

'I know what he is to her,' Toddy, whose own beady eyes never missed a trick, leaned across to murmur to Jock, 'She's never taken her eyes off that wad in his top pocket.'

Jock was worried. Maybe he ought to warn the sandy-haired whaler. Or warn off the girl. If she rolled him for that packet, Sergeant Watt would give Jock Weir a blistering for letting it happen. On the other hand, the whaler was no fool. Look at the way he'd brushed off Gloria and her skinny mate. Jock felt he'd better let it ride for a bit.

Gloria, having failed to get her clutches on the sandy-haired whaler, was trying her luck with another of the big spenders. Fancy Smith came across, just as she was coaxing him for another round of drinks.

'Is this lady annoying you?' he asked the fellow.

The Norwegian looked first puzzled and then angry at Fancy's interference. Fancy calmed him down and turned to Gloria. 'Behave yourself now,' he admonished her.

She flounced a shoulder at him. Fancy leaned close to her, smiling genially as he murmured, 'Touch his money and you'll spend your next three months inside.'

Gloria's eyes went hard. Ruddy coppers, always interfering. The sailor boys ought to have a right to spend their money any way they liked. She nudged up to the fellow she was with, as Fancy gave her a final warning. 'Don't delay him, darling. Don't forget he has a bus to catch at dawn.'

Gloria shrieked with laughter. 'Dawn, he says. That's a long way away, isn't it?' The Norwegian, only half understanding the words, none the less caught the sense of her laughter and joined in gustily himself, clutching Gloria to him in a shimmy of noisy mirth.

The sandy-haired whaler and the quiet girl both looked round at this.

It was Nils who looked away first with a grunt of disgust.

'What's the matter?' she asked him.

'My shipmates,' he told her. 'To go to woman like that. Unless I love woman, no good.'

Maggie smiled at him, an understanding smile. He asked her, 'Have drink?'

'No more, thanks. Not for the minute.'

'Hokay. You nice girl.' He looked at her earnestly. 'I tell you I take my money back home. When I have enough, I give up whaling.'

One of his mates, overhearing this, crackled something at him in Norwegian

'What does he say?' asked Maggie

'He says nobody gives up whalers. He says money too good.'

Another crackle of Norwegian followed. Maggie looked up at the fellow who had spoken. 'What was that then?'

Nils translated for her. 'He says you are pretty. He says you are the prettiest girl in this place.'

Maggie looked down. 'It's never done me any good.'

Nils was puzzled. 'You don't like to be pretty? No?'

'It's all right.'

'What you do for a job?'

She hesitated before she answered. 'I'm a dancer.'

'A dancer? That is a nice job. You are not just pretty, you are clever also, eh?'

There was a wry look on Maggie's face. 'Oh, ay. I'm brilliant.'

'You like to dance, eh?'

'It's all right. I used to like it. When I was little.'

'And now, you not like it so much?'

'There's dancing and dancing. Any road, I wasn't very good.' She was drawn sombrely into herself as she went on, 'If I had been any good I'd be doing it now, instead of sitting here talking to you.'

He looked suddenly wounded, slapped down. 'Don't you like talking to me?'

She came out of her indrawn mood, as if reminded of a purpose in being there. 'Of course I do, love.'

Nils confided to her, 'I like talking to you. On whales, not see woman, many weeks. To just sit here and talk to a pretty girl, this is very nice, I tell you. You don't mind this?'

He watched her face anxiously for an answer. She smiled at him. 'I'm not stopping you, am I?'

He heaved a great gusty sigh of relief and knocked back the next of his line-up of double whiskies. When he put the glass down it took him a second or two to get his eyes back in focus. Then he saw that the quiet girl was sitting quietly, hands on her lap. 'You're not drinking,' he said to her.

'Yes I am, love.' She took a sip from the edge of her glass, while he put his empty one down and immediately reached for another. Elsewhere in the bar, glasses were being drained and re-filled at a speed that was keeping Toddy and the three barmen pulling at the beer levers without a stop. In the way of all drunks everywhere, some of the whalers had got steadily merrier and some more morose, while some had felt the inevitable urge to express whatever they were feeling by thumping whoever happened to be nearest. The thumpers were hustled out by a batch of uniformed

coppers hurriedly called in by Jock and Fancy Mr Barlow and Sergeant Watt would deal with them down at the station, lock them in the cells for a few hours until they'd cooled off, sobered up, and were ready to catch the morning bus with whatever cash was left to them from their spending in the Magga Dan

Toddy had alternative accommodation for the drunks who needed a few hours cooling off without necessarily being locked up When the sandy-haired whaler lurched over to the bar and asked for a quiet room to lie down, Toddy plucked a key from a row of hooks and handed it over 'Upstairs Room Number Seven No ladies allowed'

Nils took the room-key and a bottle of whisky and paid for both, stuffing the change from a fiver into the thick wad that was still bulging the top pocket of his coat Then he went back to the table where the quiet girl was still sitting quietly 'You all right?' she asked him

'I feel pretty tired, I think I go lie down' He showed her the key with the number '7' stamped on the metal tag 'You excuse me?' he asked politely

She nodded, without a smile He leaned over her to touch her cheek 'Goodbye, nice girl'

Jock Weir saw him staggering across the bar and out the corridor to the stairs, waving his full bottle of whisky in response to the farewell cheers of his mates Going to sleep it off, was he? Well, that'd be him out of harm's way for a bit What about the mystery, though? Where had she got to? He looked around for the quiet girl

Maggie was at the bar, getting herself a straight gin She knocked it back with a grimace of distaste as Gloria came over to her

'You want to be careful dear'

'I don't know what you're talking about' Maggie turned away, but Gloria was determined to tell the girl, for her own good

'These whaler-boys play it rough You could wind up in a mortuary'

Maggie's lips tightened 'Mind your own business'

Gloria smiled That's exactly what she was doing, minding her own business She took a visiting card from her handbag and thrust it at Maggie 'When you want a regular job, you come to me I'll look after you'

Maggie looked at the card with the terse inscription on it Gloria, 31 Leek Street, Salford She pushed it away 'That sort of job no thanks Never'

Gloria tucked the visiting card into the flap of the quiet girl's handbag 'We'll see, love' She wandered away to her chosen whaler friend who was now so drunk that he could hardly stand

'Gloria,' he murmured, 'Gloria,' as she put her arms around him, ostensibly to help him stay upright. Fancy Smith, passing at that moment, grabbed one of her hands which was fluttering too damn near where it shouldn't be. 'It's all right, love,' he assured her, 'I'm not after holding your hand. Just keeping it out of his pocket.' He moved on to where his mate was standing. 'All right, Jock?' he shouted.

Jock Weir nodded. 'All right!' It seemed all right, the dockers and the whalers kept apart, the tarts resigned to the fact that they'd not get away with anything under the watchful eyes of the two coppers, as for the quiet girl? He looked about for her. She'd gone. Ah well, she was best out of it. He wandered along to where the dockers were sat in a tight resentful knot, still moaning about the way their pub had been taken over by the Scandinavians. They eyed him as he passed, aware of the fact that he was there to keep them in order, ready to take a swing at him if the need should arise, but loath to take the initiative in any fist-swinging without their accepted leader, Big Des. And Big Des, as they knew, had been warned by the coppers to keep out of the Magga Dan.

It was coming up to closing time and the pressure on the barmen was mounting as ever thirsty boozers made sure of getting several more rounds in before the cloths were put over the beer handles. One of the dockers, trying to get last gills in for his mates, was pushed along from one end of the counter to the other, kept from being served by the thrusting shoulders of the whalers. He gave up in disgust and returned to his fellow dockers, the empty glasses still clutched in his hand.

'You get 'em in. I can't,' he told them.

'Who says you can't?'

The frustrated docker turned to the speaker who'd just come in. It was Big Des. He filled the doorway, swaying gently, smiling benevolently. If ever anyone stood as a model for a statue of sweetness and light, it was Big Des as he stood there just then. He peered around through his misted-over spectacles, took them off and polished them with a hanky that put more grease on than it took off, and sat the specs back on his fat nose again. The pianist, seeing him arrive, had broken off the whalers' song he was playing and thumped straight into Des's favourite tune. 'She's a Lassie from Lancashire.' The whalers roared their disapproval, but Des just nodded mildly back at them, tumty-tumtying to the music. When he and the pianist had both got to the end of the first chorus he let the pianist go on alone for the second time round while he attended to the more serious business of getting drinks in. He swept up the dockers' empty glasses in two big fists which he thrust

into the nearest cluster of whalers, who promptly made way to let him get at the counter. One by one he took the glasses as they were refilled and passed them over to his mates. Then he got a fresh half jar filled for himself and stayed at the counter to knock it back. It went down in one long smooth swallow. When he was finished, he hefted the empty glass in his hand, smiling benignly upon the whalers either side of him. Toddy scented trouble and hurried over. 'Put that glass down, Des. Don't start nothing.'

Des nodded. 'Fill it up then, Toddy.'

Toddy snatched away the empty glass and put it under the foaming beer tap. Jock Weir moved in to the counter and stared at Big Des in total disbelief. 'You were told to stay out of here!'

Des grinned down at the stocky copper next to him. 'Ay.'

'Come on then. Out!' Jock jerked a peremptory thumb at the door.

Des's second half-jar of ale had just come to a head. Des looked at it mildly. 'Just let me finish my ale. Then I'll be off.'

It wasn't an unreasonable request. Jock nodded. 'Drink it and go.'

Butter would not even have gone soft at the edges in Des's mouth. 'All right, lad. All right.'

Jock gave him a long hard look and turned away. Out in the corridor he could see a pair of sea-boots descending the stairs. It was the sandy-haired whaler returning to the bar, having evidently slept off enough of his booze-up to come down for a second filling. Jock turned away in disgust. He'd get precious little in now before closing time. Fifteen more minutes and then they could all pack it in.

Nils Ahlsonn staggered into the bar, half-dazed with sleep and still half-drunk, but sensible enough of what he was about to be feeling carefully in all his pockets. Having been through the lot once, he started all over again, feeling in each one in turn, with the same wounded look on his face that he'd had before when he'd thought that Maggie was slapping him down. He lurched from one to the other of his whaling mates, gabbling something at them in their own lingo. A hush came over them as they took in the sense of what he was saying. The dockers, too, piped down, watching what was going on with mystified curiosity.

Big Des asked one of the whalers, 'What's he saying?' And then as Nils lurched by, he grabbed his shoulder and spun him round, face to face. 'What did you say, mister?'

Nils swayed back and forth in front of Big Des. The two biggest men in the bar, one as tough as a Mersey gannet, the other as soft as a snow-goose. 'My money,' Nils explained. 'I've lost my money.'

Des wagged a fat reproving finger 'You shouldn't have got into bad company, then, should you lad'

Nils looked helplessly from Des to his fellow-whalers to Toddy behind the bar 'I don't want trouble'

'Then don't make trouble'

Nils turned away, and Des lifted his half-jar to his lips. Toddy heaved a sigh of relief, a sigh too soon. A lurching step from Nils jogged Big Des's elbow and spilled the glass of ale all down his front. Des hardly moved his feet as he chopped a blow with his free hand to the back of Nils's neck. The whaler went down, pole-axed as Des bent over him to make a right good job of it. He didn't get the chance of a second blow. Jock Wein was already in with a clean tackle to the big fellow's midriff. Des went down like a sack of potatoes that had had the bottom ripped out. For a second it looked as though the rest of the boozers, whalers and dockers alike, would all pile in and make a mêlée of it. But in that second, Fancy Smith was there, he and Jock hauling the two dazed assailants to their feet.

'Take them both in,' Jock told Fancy.

Fancy hesitated. 'Didn't the whaler say he'd lost his money?'

'Take them in anyway,' Jock insisted. 'I'll report the money.'

Fancy whistled up two uniformed PCs who man-handled Big Des and the whaler out to a waiting Black Maria. Jock looked up at the time on the pub clock. There were still ten minutes to go before closing, but he'd had enough. Maybe he should have chucked his weight about a bit more, earlier on. Maybe if he had there'd have been no fight, or the sandy-haired whaler losing his money. Where would he have lost it? Upstairs, like as not. Well, there was no point in hanging on to those who'd been down below all the while, and he'd just as soon have them out of the way.

'Close the bar,' he ordered Toddy. 'Get them all out.'

There was a howl of protest. Jock was adamant. Toddy rang the ship's bell hanging up behind the bar and bellowed out, 'Drink up! Pub's closed!' The barmen covered the beer pumps and began whipping glasses away. The pianist struck up 'Good night, ladies,' and the ladies gathered themselves together and cast an eye to gathering anything else they could outside. Jock and Fancy edged the lot of them out to the street, tarts and dockers and whalers united now in their protestation of this ten minutes' curtailment of their rightful drinking time. Fancy was amiably bustling the last of them through the doorway when Jock turned to the corridor in time to see one more customer descending the stairs and trying to sneak out. It was a girl. It was the quiet girl.

He called her back. 'Just a minute, miss.'

She turned, looked at him gravely.

'I'm a police officer,' he told her 'What were you doing upstairs?'

'I went to the ladies' room'

Jock pointed along the corridor 'There's one over there'

'Is there? I didn't know'

Jock wondered if she was telling the truth. But she had been with the sandy-haired whaler downstairs, then the whaler had gone upstairs and lost his money, and now, here she was coming down from upstairs herself. It added up. 'All right. What's your name?' he demanded.

'Rowton,' she told him, and volunteered the proof of it in the form of her employment card which she took from her handbag.

Jock read out the name on it. 'Margaret Mae Rowton.'

'That's right.'

'This card hasn't been stamped for a long time.'

'Does that matter?'

The quietness of her was beginning to worry Jock. He took the handbag to put the card back in, and at the same time looked through whatever else was in there. The whaler's wad was a thick one, it couldn't just be tucked anywhere.

'What are you looking for?' she asked.

He told her 'That sailor you were with. He went upstairs, and then you followed him.'

She said quietly but firmly, 'I went to the ladies' room.'

Jock insisted, 'Listen to me. You followed him, and he's lost his money.'

She shrugged. 'So what?'

His temper began to fray. 'This isn't a fiver, y'know!'

She held him with a level look. 'Anything you find on me, you can keep.'

The only cash he could find in her handbag was a few coins; she'd have to be searched next. Send her to the station for it, or get a policewoman down to the Magga Dan? Which was it to be?

The decision was being taken for him by Barlow, who was fit to bust his collar stud at the way things had turned out. Spite of his warnings, and spite of John Watt's supposedly thorough briefing of the Z Cars lads, here was Big Des at the station being booked for brawling, and for good measure here was his fellow-brawler, this Norwegian whaler fellow, Ahlsonn, Nils Ahlsonn, as it said in his pay book. And what it also said was that when he was paid off that evening he'd had five hundred pounds, and yet here he was now without a single penny! 'Five hundred quid!' he raged at John Watt. 'What have you got at the Magga Dan? Policemen or pantomime bobbies?'

Watt shifted uncomfortably. 'I'll get down there right away. See this girl Weir's picked on.'

'And take a policewoman with you'

'Right, sir'

Barlow gave him a heavy look 'I'll be close behind you, Sergeant Watt' Which put an extra spurt on John Watt's dash to the Magga Dan, and an extra touch of pepper in his roasting of the two oafs he'd left there 'All right How did it start?' he demanded of them

Jock Weir looked at the toes of his boots Fancy Smith volunteered an explanation 'It just did, Sarge'

Watt rounded on him 'You saw Big Des come in?'

'Yes, Saige'

'Then why the hammer didn't you escort him out?'

'That's a good question, Sarge' He fished for an answer Watt supplied it himself 'Shall I tell you why? Because he said he'd just finish his drink and then go Did he?'

The two Z Cars lads answered together, 'Yessir!'

Watt looked at them scornfully, by heck, would they never learn? And on top of it, letting this slip of a girl, this mystery, this amateur, get away with rolling the whaler for five hundred quid Five hundred quid! Well, it had to be somewhere

They searched Room Number 7 where the whaler had gone for his brief snooze They searched the upstairs landing and the corridor and the stairs The policewoman searched the upstairs and downstairs ladies' lavatories, and searched Maggie herself with a thoroughness that made the girl turn white with shame They searched every corner of the bar, under the seats, behind the radiators, and even inside the piano At the end of it all they'd found nothing

Watt went over to where the girl was sat at a table with the policewoman standing by, and was just about ready to start squeezing the truth out of her, when Toddy let Barlow in

'Haven't seen you in here for a long time, Mr Barlow,' the publican commented

Barlow answered him with his eye on John Watt 'I don't get the time, Mr Todd. Too busy doing his job for him' He ignored Watt's indignant look and ambled over to the girl 'She did it, did she?'

'She was upstairs,' Watt told him 'No right to be there'

The girl insisted, 'I went to look for the "ladies"'

Barlow smiled at her. 'Gerraway! You don't expect us to believe that?'

He pulled up a chair, offered her a cigarette and lit it for her 'What's your job?' he asked casually

'I was a dancer,' she told him

'Strip joints,' Watt said sourly

Barlow's look at Watt was a mild reproach 'Very nice well paid

work and lots of exercise' He turned back to ask the girl as casually as before, 'Why'd you give it up for this game?'

Her eyes were wary 'What game?'

Barlow didn't press the question He nodded to the corridor. 'You went upstairs to see this sailor lad, just to smooth his brow then? He wasn't feeling very well Was that it?'

'He was you know tired'

'That's why you went upstairs?'

'No I went up because'

He interrupted her insistence that she'd only gone to the ladies' room 'Where do you live, love?'

'Gallowgate Street'

Barlow beamed at her 'I know a few people from round that way'

She didn't ask who he knew His finger traced a pattern on the table as though he were conjuring up a picture 'He was asleep when you got upstairs'

'Who're you on about now?' She was beginning to be rattled by his constant changes of subject

'This Nils what's his name?' He snapped his fingers, never could spit out names, Watt supplied it for him 'Nils Ahlsonn'

'Ay' He nodded 'You saw the money just lying there so you helped yourself'

'Why should I do that?'

He looked at her quizzically 'For a lass from Gallowgate you're not a bit quick, are you, love? What do they call you?'

'Margaret Mae Rowton'

He stared at her, a long moment 'Maggie Rowton's daughter?'

'Yes'

'I knew her A long time ago, when I was a beat copper Booked her once for the same thing'

'What thing?'

'I think they wrote the song about her, didn't they?'

'They didn't write no song about my mother'

'But there is a song' He got up and went to the bar, flipping his fingers to Toddy for a drink While Toddy drew it, Barlow leaned his back against the counter, singing softly

'Oh Maggie Maggie Mae

They have taken her away

And she won't walk down

South Street any more!'

He invited the girl to join in with a crook of his finger 'Sing up then We're all friends here'

Her lips tightened 'I don't like that song'

Barlow picked up his glass of ale and returned to the table, taking up the song where he'd left off

'The Judge he guilty found her
For robbing an Outward Bounder

She beat her fists on the table 'Shurru! Why don't you ruddy shurru!'

He ignored the outburst and asked her amiably, 'How old are you, lass?'

'Twenty-two'

'You've been married a long time'

'I've never been married'

'But you've got kids? You can't bring up kids without money
So you took his while he was asleep'

'What are you talking about?'

'The whaler you followed him upstairs, slipped into his room, he shifted slightly in his sleep, you saw the money, you took it and slipped out of the room again'

'I never went near his room'

'No You went upstairs to the "ladies" Why don't you like that song?'

'What song?'

'You know Maggie Mae'

'Because it's vulgar'

'What's it about, lass? Tell me'

Her eyes shifted away 'You can't make me tell you about that money'

'I'm not asking you about that money I know about the money I'm asking you about the song' He pulled his chair up to her so that their knees were almost touching 'Tell us about the song What's it about?'

The bar was dead quiet Toddy's mopping up of the beer puddles on the counter got slower and slower and then stopped Jock slid the pencil into the loop of his notebook Fancy folded his arms and leaned back against a partition The policewoman shifted her gaze from the girl to Barlow and back again John Watt, who knew the song as well as Barlow but wouldn't have known quite how to make use of it, settled back for his umpteenth lesson from the boss A lesson in how to do it, or how not to do it? Which was it to be?

Barlow demanded of the quiet girl, 'About the song what's it about? I'm asking you'

She couldn't take her eyes off him 'It's about this girl'

'Yes?'

'Who takes money from this whaler'

'And?'

'And his clothes'

'She takes everything, does she?'

'Ay'

He pressed in closer to her 'Then ?'

'He goes to the pawnshop Why do you have to make me say these things?'

'What happens in the pawnshop?'

'He finds his stuff'

'And ?'

'She gets caught, because the pawnshop says it was her that pawned them'

'And ?'

'She gets sent to prison'

'For how long?'

'I don't know for how long'

'And what was her name?'

'Maggie Mae'

'And what's yours?'

The final question rattled on Maggie's strung-out nerves She answered, on a rising cry of hysteria, Margaret Mae it's a common enough name, isn't it Maggie Mae, Maggie Mae, Maggie Mae'

For a long moment nobody moved or spoke Then Barlow said to the girl, softly, gently, 'It's a bit unfortunate you've got a name like that Where's your husband?'

'I told you, I'm not married'

'You are, lass There was a ring on that wedding finger for a long time You can still see the scar'

Her voice was a whisper of remembered pain 'Scar is right.'

'He was a sailor?'

'Yes'

'Got any kids?'

'One One's enough'

'Who's looking after it now?'

'Me ma'

Barlow pressed his fingertips together 'She's not working, I'll be bound And you're not working And that dress you're wearing isn't last year's, is it lass?'

She shook her head Barlow nodded his understanding 'We know how you get your money You take it off sailors'

'No'

Barlow spoke so quietly that she had to lean her head forward almost to his lips to hear what he said 'I want you to tell me lass, just where that five hundred pounds you took off the Norwegian is hidden in this pub before I find it for you'

She stared at him, her eyes round with mute defiance He began singing, as softly as a choirboy

'Oh Maggie Mae

They have taken her away'

She jerked her head away 'Why don't you ruddy shurrup!'

Barlow got up from the chair, his mood suddenly changed. He was brisk and businesslike as he turned to the others.

'What's upstairs?'

Jock answered him 'The room, sir. We've looked in that.'

'What else?'

'The "ladies".'

'You looked in there?'

'I did, sir,' the policewoman confirmed.

'What else?'

'The other bedrooms,' Fancy Smith chipped in. 'I tried them. They're locked.'

'What else?'

'Broom cupboard searched, sir.'

'And?'

'Fire escape searched.'

'And?'

It was as if he was trying to coax them into opening their eyes to something which he'd seen all along. They looked at each other blankly. His eyes were on the girl as he said softly, 'And a Gents? Have you looked in there?'

'Not properly, sir.' It was Jock. 'I didn't think.' No Jock, who'd seen all sorts of sordidness, wouldn't have thought that the quiet girl would brazenly walk into the Gents and hide the money there, and go back to pick it up perhaps the next day. Neither had anyone else thought of it, but Barlow had. 'You'd better take a proper look now, lad, hadn't you?'

Jock hurried out to the corridor and up the stairs. Barlow, who had not taken his eyes off the girl since he'd first mentioned the Gents, said to her, 'It's funny, lass, but when you're nervous, you screw up the toes of your left foot.' He picked up his jar of ale and knocked it back with lip-smacking relish. By the time he'd finished it, Jock was back with a dripping package wrapped in an oilskin wallet. 'In the cistern, sir,' he told Barlow. He put it on the table, Barlow prodded at it with the tip of a little finger. 'You're in trouble, lass,' he said to the girl, when he'd got the package open. Inside was a tightly rolled wad of notes, fivers and ones.

Nils Ahlsson identified the money as his, but made no charge against the girl for stealing it. Maggie was triumphant when she was told. 'Why should he make a charge against me? I did nowt. And you've got no proof. Now, could I have me things back?'

The policewoman spread the contents of Maggie's bag on the table of the Newtown station office: the few coins, the hanky, the bits of make-up, keys, odds and ends, and a visiting card. 'Is everything there?' she asked.

'Yes.' Maggie started thrusting them back in the bag.

'Will you sign for them please'

While Maggie scrawled her signature in the property book, the policewoman picked up the visiting card and read the inscription on it Gloria, 31 Leek Street, Salford

'Do you really want this?' she asked

'It's mine, isn't it?' Maggie demanded

'Yes'

She snatched the card 'Then I'll have it'

In the cold light of morning the hung-over whalers were brought up from the cells and sent on their way to catch the bus for Newcastle and the next ship for Norway Jock and Fancy watched the procession of them leaving the nick What a night it had been! 'If this is plain-clothes duty,' said Fancy Smith, 'I'll be glad to get back on the cars'

Jock nodded 'I'm ready for me bed myself'

Barlow, overhearing them, grunted to Watt, 'They're too used to nice regular hours on the cars Now what about this whaler fellow?'

Nils Ahlsonn was still refusing to prefer charges against Margaret Mae Rowton 'I think she good girl I not remember anything else about last night'

Barlow tried prompting him 'You don't remember anything upstairs?'

'No Nothing I am not complaining I am hokay Don't worry, eh? I not worry, you not worry, eh?'

Well, why should anyone worry? He had his money back Four eighty pounds of the five hundred he'd been paid the previous evening Twenty pounds for a rip-roaring night out wasn't too bad He signed for the remainder of his wad and shoved it in his top pocket as Maggie Mae came along the corridor escorted by the policewoman Watt hastily nudged the whaler's elbow. 'Your bus leaves in fifteen minutes Now don't you miss it'

'I not miss it Good bye' He hurried out to the street hurling a Norwegian 'Toc! Toc!' over his shoulder Maggie began hurrying after him

'Just a minute, miss' John Watt barred her way 'I want a word with you'

She looked at him with cold hatred 'Why? I've done nowt I'm out You can't keep me here' She turned to Barlow and demanded of him, 'He can't, can he!'

Barlow shrugged It was true, they couldn't keep her He shook his head The quiet girl pushed past John Watt and hurried out to the street He watched her tip-tapping after the sandy-haired whaler There were still fifteen minutes before the bus left He turned to Barlow 'She could have that wad off him yet'

Choose Your Partners

(from the television script by John Hopkins)

OFTEN AS NOT it was what the files didn't say that was best remembered. Like the one John Watt was looking at that just gave the bare details of two small-time villains being put away for only fifteen middling thefts. Well, fifteen wasn't many, and the amounts weren't great, you wouldn't think that Barlow would bother to keep a record of it in his own private files. Ay, but it was number fifteen that lifted it out of the ordinary, even though there was nothing on the record to show what way it had been different. But Barlow would remember it well enough, and so did John Watt.

Number fifteen had happened on a night that Barlow was off duty, well, it was more like it to say that he was on special duty, attending a dinner and dance in company with the big-wigs of the Police Joint Standing Committee, but what it meant to everyone belonging to Newtown nick was that Barlow was away, off out of it, not even on call except for cases of direst necessity. And when Barlow was away, although it wasn't exactly true that everyone played, at least they didn't jump around as though there was a red hot poker waiting to touch them up the second they stood still.

John Watt was even taking a few minutes in the CID office to write a personal letter. Well, why not? There was nothing on that needed his urgent attention except sit by the phone and wait for it to ring, and it wasn't often there was enough hush for him to get his thoughts straight concerning his personal affairs. It wasn't an easy letter to write, being to Mary, his wife, who'd upped and left him some time before; and while it wasn't exactly asking her to come back, it was trying to let her know that the door was still ajar. Putting that in the right words needed a bit of clear thinking before making a dash at the sheet of notepaper. He thought for a bit until he felt he'd got it, then went tearing away, quickly covering the first side of the page and turning it over to start on the other. He was halfway down the second side when the door suddenly opened, making him jump nigh six feet in the air. It was just like Barlow to come back unexpected and catch him at it. Only it wasn't Barlow, it was Detective Constable Hicks.

'Can't you knock before you come barging in!' Watt thrust the unfinished letter into the desk drawer. Hicks gaped at him. What was the matter with the fellow? He had knocked. Thumped once and then walked in. Not his fault if John Watt had cloth ears.

And if he didn't believe him DC Hicks turned to Sergeant Blackitt at the station desk 'Tell him, Blackie Didn't I knock?'

Blackitt nodded 'He did John Not that I'd blame him if he hadn't It was that quiet, we thought you'd maybe gone off home'

Watt's indignation was still on the boil He held out a hand that was as steady as a bar of pig-iron 'Will you look at that Shaking Just for once I get a bit of peace and quiet Catch up on my correspondence, I thought Safe as houses tonight, I thought and bang!' He glared at Hicks, who apologized, though he didn't know what for Watt flicked a look at the ceiling, Barlow's office was up there 'I thought *he'd* come back You know how he does "Just looking in, John See how you are" I near came apart at the seams'

Blackitt shook his head 'No fear of him coming in tonight'

'That's what I thought,' said Hicks 'Why I looked in, John Thought you'd maybe fancy a drink'

Maybe there was a bit of a tremor in Watt's hand after all He looked at it hard I need a drink now I do that Might have one'

'if there's not a lot doing,' Hicks hastened to slip in

'Nothing doing tonight,' Blackitt told him

'Just the Standing joint's little get-together,' said Watt 'Do you call that nothing?'

'It's "nothing" if you're not invited, John' Blackitt picked up a message form 'Apart from that . . . Smith and Weir've got a puncture Stuck out on Mallory Road'

'That's a way off, isn't it?' Watt came out to the station office to look at the road map that Blackitt had got on the counter Together they searched for Mallory Road They found it amongst a lot of green Fancy Smith stuck out there? Watt looked at Blackitt suspiciously 'No girls out there, are there?'

'Shouldn't think so'

'It's a long road Did they say just where they were?'

'No'

Watt looked at the map again Mallory Road Two big houses and a farm Railway line running hard by it Right place for a weary copper to rest He wouldn't put it past Fancy Smith, but not Jock No, never Jock Weir If Jock Weir said they'd got a puncture, then they'd got a puncture, and Jock would be sweating blood and ale to get the wheel changed and Z Victor One back on the road again Mind you, if Barlow was around, he'd be wanting to know why it wasn't back on the road already But if Barlow was around, Hicks and Blackie wouldn't be stood about with John Watt, propping up the station office counter; and young Sweet wouldn't be sat staring at the typewriter the way he was Someone ought to chase him up at least But it wasn't John

Watt's way to chase anyone just for the sake of chasing With Barlow, it was like a trial of strength, keep on pushing to see how far you can go With Watt, it was a matter of keeping strength in reserve, waiting for the need to push before testing how much push you've got And what better way was there of keeping up reserves of strength than with a jar of ale He nodded to DC Hicks 'Come on, then If you're going to get one in'

They were on their way out to the 'Tabernacle' when Blackitt asked, 'What shall I say if Mr Barlow rings in?'

Watt thought about it for a moment 'Tell Mr Barlow there's this revolution, the station's on fire, we've lost twenty uniformed coppers in the Market Place and five CID in the "Tabby" You'll hold out to the last paper clip, and Jock Weir and Fancy Smith'll come to the rescue soon as they've patched up their spare wheel'

John Watt was to find out later that, out on Mallory Road, Weir and Smith were within spitting distance of what was going to become crime number fifteen But when they first skidded to a halt on the roadside as the result of a blown-out tyre, crime number fifteen was no more yet than the far-off whistle of a train At the moment that Jock cut the engine and opened the car door, Mallory Road was as quiet as the grave His first footfall on the soft mud patch where they'd come to a halt broke the night silence, and as he plodded round the car to look at the damage the squelching of his boots was like a coachload of trippers crossing the sands at Morecambe Bay By hell and fury, it was going to be the devil's own task changing the wheel in this damned bog Well, looking at it would do no good He stripped his coat off and got the tools ready

Fancy Smith got out the other side of the car where the ground was dry He looked across the darkened curve of the land Always made him feel a bit funny seeing so much of nowhere without a single light showing Ay but there was one light, across the other side of the railway line That'd be Mallory Hall, where the nobs hung out Come to think of it, His Lordship wouldn't be hanging out there tonight His Lordship, being on the Joint Standing Committee, would be at the big do that was on, rubbing shoulders with Charlie Barlow Fancy that then! Charlie Barlow and Lord Tenterton of Mallory Hall supping ale together And maybe the light showing in the Hall was where the butler was getting out the tray of drinks for Barlow and His Lordship to come back to later Fancy chuckled at the thought He opened the back door of the car and sat himself comfortable on the edge of it to continue his reverie

Round the other side of the car, Jock swore as the jack slipped

sideways for the third time 'This damned mud' What was needed was a bit of wood, bit of flat wood to go under the jack, give it a firm seating He started round to enlist Fancy's help, mud-spattered and carrying the muddied car-jack 'Give us a hand, Fancy,' he called out 'I need a bit of wood'

Fancy's fancying had gone off in another direction from Mallory Hall It was hovering somewhere about the local Palais, centred on his latest gul-friend 'I was thinking, d'you know I'm maybe wrong in trying the usual approach Should I go a bit quieter, d'you think? Take her by surprise?' He turned to Jock, shifting his weight on the edge of the car, which bounced up and down on its springs Jock damn near threw the jack at him 'You'll not have been helping'

'You what?'

'Every time I try to jack the car up, the jack goes down into the mud'

Fancy looked at him Was he daft? The answer was obvious 'You need a bit of wood, bit of flat wood, put under the jack That'll do the trick'

Jock had to give Fancy his due, he did manage to find a flat bit of wood But having done that, he seemed to think he could happily go back to his star-gazing While Jock sweated and grunted Fancy nattered away about the quiet of the night, and taking their time to sit back and enjoy it How the flaming heck could anyone enjoy anything, up to the elbows in mud and wrestling with wheel nuts that wouldn't turn Fancy looked on disparagingly 'Have you seen them on the telly? changing wheels on those racing cars? Blooming hummer, they're quick with it'

Jock grunted an answer that Fancy could hardly make out What was the matter with him? What was he so sour about? It wasn't because he was doing the wheel-changing, was it? Fancy had offered to help, but naturally Jock had said no Changing a wheel was a one man job Still, maybe it was only fair to lend a hand Pity it was nearly done, though He got up from the wheel he was sitting on 'Here, Jock. I'll finish it off, shall I?'

Jock stood very still, and answered him quietly 'If you come near me, Fancy Smith, I'll likely bend this jack handle round your fat neck'

Fancy scratched his fat neck 'Oh ay?'

'Av'

Well, that was it, you never knew with Jock, get all humpy for nothing, he would Not as if he'd been at it all night It was only Fancy looked at his watch and muttered to himself Nine-fifteen

Jock snapped at him, 'You what?'

Fancy's indignation spilled over 'By heck I was just looking at my watch, y'know I'm allowed to do that, aren't I? All I said was it's nine-fifteen In case you're interested It's nine-fifteen'

'Thanks'

'Don't mention it'

But Fancy Smith wasn't the fellow to stay uppity for long The distant rumble of wheels on the railway track straightway switched his mood 'Hey-up It's a train'

'Hoo-blooming ray!'

'I used to collect train numbers, d'you know When I was a kid'

Jock asked him, and he sounded concerned about it, 'You haven't given it up, have you?'

'Well, as a matter of fact ' Fancy choked his words off, he knew when his leg was being pulled Anyways, it meant that Jock had got over his umptyness Getting that wheel-change finished would be why, though it had taken him time enough 'Course, you know ' he told Jock, ' . if Mr Barlow'd been about the station tonight, you'd not have been able to take so long'

Jock hesitated as he was about to throw the jack into the car boot He might throw it at Fancy yet 'You reckon you'd have done it quicker?' he demanded

'I'm not saying that I'm not saying that at all. I'm only saying that with him not about there's not the same need for hurry Well, is there?'

The clatter of the tools and the slam of the boot was the only answer he got from Jock The approaching train was close upon them now, its lights throwing dancing patterns on the trees lining the track Jock had his jacket and cap on He called to Fancy, 'Are you ready for off then?'

'Hang on a minute' Fancy jerked a thumb at the front light on the engine 'It'll come right past here'

Jock grinned in the darkness Like a kid was Fancy 'Want to watch the pretty lights, do you?' They both stood leaning against the car as the train drew level with them and rattled by, coach after coach 'Aren't you going to wave?' said Jock

Whatever Fancy said in answer was drowned out by the shriek of the engine whistle as the train pushed its way into a tunnel

It was nine-eighteen on Fancy's watch, a time they were to remember later If it hadn't been for the train passing at that moment, coming in between them and Mallory Hall, they would have seen that one of the windows of the big house was lit up by a sudden flare, and if the engine whistle and the clackety-clack of the coach bogies hadn't made such a racket, they would have heard a distant bang When the train had passed, the curving land beyond was as still and silent as it had been before Fancy turned his back on it Nature was all right in small bits, it was

nigh time to get back to a spot of life though Back in the car he got on the radio to Headquarters Control 'Hallo, love Here we are again'

It d be that pretty Betty Thingy on duty tonight Her voice came back at him, all stiff and starchy 'What did you say?'

He threw a look at Jock beside him, always on at him, was everyone, to use proper radio procedure He had another go in his poshest voice 'Z Victor One to BD Back on the road again. Will you inform Newtown And by the way, love ' he couldn't resist it, ' have you missed me?'

What Jock and Fancy had missed at Mallory Hall was a safe-blowing Piecing it together later on that night, John Watt had to admit that the way of it had been damned clever Meladdos had broken into the Hall on the one night when His Lordship and his good lady wife were away at a do that had been mentioned in the local press several days before, and they might well have guessed that nigh on every one of the senior police officers in the county would be hog-tied and ham-strung at the same do Having found the study where the safe was, they'd got all set for the blowing and then wired the detonators to the telephone terminal box Didn't take much figuring out, did that Meladdos had waited outside the room, where there wouldn't be any risk of getting hit by flying bits, while an accomplice on the outside dialled the number of Mallory Hall And when the call was connected and the terminals sprung, instead of ding-ding it was bang-bang! Long distance triggering-off service for safe-blowers by courtesy of the GPO

Ay, and there'd be another reason for triggering-off by telephone The blowing of the safe would have made a fairish bang, yet Mrs Lockwood, the housekeeper, had heard nowt of it at the time Never heard owt all evening, she said, except the trains going by Well, she would hear those The Tentertons and all their household skivvies had been acutely aware of the trains going by at the bottom of their garden ever since the railways had decided on it as the only possible route for a branch line, much to the disgust of the previous Lord Tenterton Though likely he'd got a good bit of compensation at the time to molly-coddle his upset feelings Long and short of it though, was that every time a train passed by there they not only had the rattle of the wheels and the rumble of the coaches, but just for good measure they also had the shrill of the whistle as the train entered Mallory Tunnel Which wouldn't entirely drown out, but would certainly take away from the noise made by the safe blowing There was a level crossing not far off, and a telephone kiosk next to it, where anyone waiting could time his call so as to make

connection just at the moment the whistle was sounding. All it wanted was for Watt to check the time of the trains passing that level crossing, eliminate those that were too early or too late, and bingo! he had the time of the only one it could be, which was nine-eighteen. Jock and Fancy looked at each other when Watt came up with the answer, they'd not heard the bang at nine-eighteen neither.

But if they and Mrs Lockwood had failed to hear owt, it seemed that someone else inside the house must have had sharper hearing. Mr Hulme, the handyman, gardener, factotum, or whatever they called him, had been working in the kitchen that evening, putting up some shelves. When Mrs Lockwood went wandering in there, nigh on ten o'clock, meaning to make herself a bedtime cup of cocoa, Hulme was nowhere about, but the light was on and his working gear was still scattered about, spread all over. Going out to the hall to look for him she saw that the study door was open, which it shouldn't have been with His Lordship off at the dinner dance. Just inside the study door, Mr Hulme lay sprawled across the carpet, eyes closed, hardly breathing, with a lump at the back of his head as big as a hen's egg, and a nasty smear of blood dirtying his shirt collar. And as for the mess in the room, she'd hardly know where to start getting it all straight again.

Fancy Smith made it plain as soon as he arrived, that she'd best touch nothing. He and Jock had been in to Newtown and out again by the time that Mrs Lockwood had found Hulme unconscious and called in the police, they'd even managed to squeeze in a break for a cuppa tea with Graham and Lynch, the crew of the other duty Z Car. And it wasn't true to say, as PC Sweet had half hinted, that they'd been taking advantage of Barlow's absence to spin out the cuppa tea for longer than they would have done on any other night. Fact was, that there was nothing doing at the time, and if the four of them had been wanted well it didn't need but a minute to fetch them. Cheeky young beggar, that Sweet. Still, the four Z Cars lads had taken him down a bit. Fancy grinned at the thought of it. He'd come into the canteen, had that Sweet, all full of himself, asking them if they meant to stay there all night, and if they did, hadn't they better have some beds sent up, and only just remembering to add in time that it was Sergeant Blackitt who'd sent him along to say so. Cheeky, he was. Him and Blackitt, if it came to that, both of them stuck behind the station desk, in the warm, out of the wet, thinking they could get away with anything.

He'd nigh-on waggled his finger at them had Sweet. Like a schoolteacher ticking off a bunch of kids. 'You know what's wrong with you lot.'

The four Z Car lads turned on him

'No what?'

'Is it serious?'

'Can you operate?'

'Shall I ever play the violin again?'

Sweet tried to push his way past, but they weren't having it

'You were going to tell us what's wrong with us?'

Sweet spelled it out, 'Nothing to do, that's what You're always like this when there's nothing going on'

The four lads looked at each other, astonishment lighting up their faces

'He's right He's dead right'

'Thank you for telling us, doctor'

'It's always best to have these things out in the open'

'Shall us come and see you once a week?'

PC Sweet straightened his tunic and tie which had been knocked sky-whift by their rough-housing 'You're daft, the lot of you Off watch sat up here could be anything going on out there, d'you know'

Jock Weir took Fancy Smith to one side 'Do you know what I think, Constable Smith?'

'No, Constable Weir What do you think?'

'I think he's after our jobs'

Graham and Lynch, hearing this, tut-tutted at the thought The four of them advanced on Sweet who backed away, protesting When they'd got him up against the wall, they all four came to attention, dressed by the right in a straight line, and tucked their caps under their right arms

'We will at all times remember the inspiration

'The example

'The shining example

'Of PC Sweet'

'Have you anything to say before sentence is carried out?' Jock didn't wait for Sweet to answer, he addressed his imaginary firing squad, 'Ready! Aim! Fire!'

The handle of the canteen door was pushed down, making an almost inaudible click behind their backs In a split part of a split second they broke their line-up and lounged towards the door as Sergeant Blackitt came in Jock Weir wiped a sweaty brow with the back of his hand 'Thank God you came in, Sarge. PC Sweet here has been keeping us chatting for the last half hour.' He held the door open for the other three and followed them out The last glimpse they had of young Sweet was him stammering his explanations to a grim as granite Sergeant Blackitt. Next time he'd think twice before putting on airs

Mind you, he'd been right in one respect. 'Anything' not only

could have been, but had been happening out there. If by 'anything' you included the break-in at Mallory Hall. Not that it would have made any difference if Jock and Fancy had been in or out of the canteen at the time, since they couldn't do owt about Mallory Hall until it had been notified, and it wasn't notified until they were on watch in Z Victor One again, cruising along in the general direction of Mallory Road. It didn't take them but three or four minutes to get to the house, although the ambulance was already there when they arrived, and the ambulance men were up in the study where the trouble was. But then, they'd have had a shorter distance to come from County Hospital, and there'd only been a matter of seconds in it, only just enough for them to spread a blanket over the prostrate form of Mr Hulme.

'He's not dead, is he?'

The ambulance man shook his head. 'He's hurt bad though. I wouldn't like to move him till a doctor's had a look. If I could use your wireless to call in.'

'There's no phone?'

'There is. But I thought I'd best not touch it. It's off the hook, d'you see.'

Jock and Fancy took in the phone lying on the desk. Somebody'd been interrupted, maybe by Mr Hulme coming along to see what was going on, and they'd heard him coming, and likely waited behind the door for him, and wham! Going to be a nasty business was this. John Watt had better get his skates on and shift down there fast.

John Watt had been supping his jar of ale when Mrs Lockwood made her 999 call. He didn't need worry about missing anything important, the landlord's phone was just the other side of the bar, and Sergeant Blackitt was only five seconds away on the other end of it. Blackie'd not had need to use the phone for anything urgent for some while though. Getting quite bored with it, he was, standing there staring at the walls, without even the usual yackitting from PC Sweet. What was the matter with the lad? He'd been very quiet all evening.

Blackitt strolled across and stood behind him for a good thirty seconds before Sweet so much as looked round to see him standing there.

'All right, are you?' asked Blackitt.

'Yes, sergeant.'

'I was wondering. Not like you, is it talking your head off ever since you came on duty.'

'Talking?'

'Or not talking?'

'I see what you mean, sergeant. Well . . .' he took a deep breath.

and decided he'd be brave about it, 'it's this book I've been reading'

'A book You've been reading a book?'

Sweet nodded 'And there's this fellow in it dead spitting image of Mr Barlow'

'You've never taken to reading that sort of book'

'His name's Porfiry'

'Who are we talking about now?'

'This Russian'

'What Russian?'

Sweet explained patiently, 'This bloke I was telling you about Porfiry in "Crime and Punishment" Dead spitting image of Mr Barlow'

Blackitt looked at him in astonishment 'PC Sweet, there's just the one bloke's like Mr Barlow and that's Mr Barlow Think on that and be thankful'

Sweet thought about it for two and a half seconds and then had no more time to think about it again, by that time Headquarters Control were on the phone alerting them to the break-in at Mallory Hall, and from then on it was all go It was 'get on the blower, Sweet, and raise John Watt', and 'get on the blower and ask them to fetch Mr Barlow', and do this and do that and never mind the other

John Watt came in for his hat and coat and hurried straight out again, leaving Hicks behind to check whether Mr Barlow was coming along himself But there was no doubt in Watt's mind Break-in at Mallory Hall, home of Lord Tenterton! Choose whether it was only a silver paper-knife that had been lifted or the whole of the family plate, His Lordship'd not be satisfied with a mere detective sergeant being in charge Which was why John Watt didn't do much when he got to Mallory Hall, except look, and look hard at the tea-up in the study the safe blown open and empty, the wires leading across to the telephone terminal, the unconscious man on the stretcher with the doctor tending to him, and the mess, mess, mess everywhere As he moved carefully about, taking it all in, he was aware of Jock and Fancy hovering, expecting him to give them their instructions But there wasn't much point, with him only holding the fort until Barlow got there, as likely as not with one or two other senior officers from the dinner dance who'd jump at a good excuse for walking out on the stuffed shirts and getting on with some real coppers' work

The doctor came over and asked if it was all right to send Hulme off to the hospital Watt was glad he'd said the hospital and not the mortuary Didn't look at all good, did the fellow, as the stretcher men carried him out, sort of waxy faced, but

Watt had seen men hit over the head and look worse than this, and then come on duty next morning with nothing worse than an extra hair parting to show for it. Maybe Hulme would pull through. The doctor shoved his stethoscope away. 'I suppose you'd like to hear all about it?'

'Ay, I would,' said Watt. 'But it might save you the trouble of telling it a dozen times if you hung on a while.'

Doctor Fortin was a squarish, no-nonsense sort of man. 'Surely if I tell you,' he demanded, 'then you can tell anyone else who needs to know.'

'You'd think so,' Watt agreed. 'But all the same if you don't mind'

'All right. Who is coming anyway?'

'My boss, I'm sure of that. Otherwise well, it could be almost anyone.'

'I should have brought my autograph book.'

Watt acknowledged the joke with a thin smile, which only seemed to increase the doctor's impatience. 'Shouldn't you be looking for the men who've done this?'

He wasn't prepared for Watt's 'D'you know where they are?', and was that much less cocksure when he answered 'No. Of course I don't.'

'Neither do I. And given these circumstances' Watt took a deep breath and looked around the study, 'given these circumstances, quickest way is wait till someone tells me where to look.'

There was a scrunch of wheels on the gravel drive below the window, it was likely the arrival of the someone who was going to do the telling. John Watt went to the window and looked down. Barlow's car had stopped nose to tail with Z Victor One, and Barlow was already bouncing towards the front door. And by heck, there were one two three more cars coming up the drive. The first to stop was a big squared-up Daimler, which'd be His Lordship himself. Behind it was a Jaguar which Watt recognized as belonging to Assistant Chief Constable Harrison, toffee-nosed Harrison. Ay, it stood for a pound to a penny that he'd be around where any of the local gentry were involved.

Barlow came into the study, taking it all in with a quick look round, the safe, the wires, the telephone terminals. 'That's the way they did it, obviously,' he said to Watt.

'That's what I thought, sir.'

Doctor Fortin 'ahemmed' his way in to their deliberations. Watt introduced him. 'Doctor Fortin, sir. Examined Hulme. He's hung on to tell us what he's found.'

Barlow's putting-off was a bit more man-to-man than John Watt's had been, but it meant the same thing. 'If you wouldn't

mind, doctor there'll be some more of us here shortly Might save some time, in the end, if you could hang on tell us all at once.'

They waited, stiff and formal, as Lord and Lady Tenterton made their agitated chattering way up the stairs, accompanied by Assistant Chief Constable Harrison mouthing his reassurances 'do everything possible' 'no stone unturned' When the Tentertons had got over their initial shock at seeing the violated study and the wrecked safe, Barlow allowed Fortin to give his verdict on the injured man 'Hulme was struck on the back of the neck with a fairly heavy, blunt instrument There was just the one blow, expertly delivered to cause maximum effect with minimum fuss' Aware of Lady Tenterton's distress, he softened his voice 'I've no wish to alarm you, but you should prepare yourself Hulme will be in hospital for some time—some little time'

Barlow thanked the doctor and let him go Then he took Watt aside for a quick run-down on immediate action required 'I want Z Victor Two over here at once, them and Z Victor One on house-to-house inquiries, all the way round here I want Maycock and Little and Hicks and anyone you can lay hands on stood by at Newtown I want'

Watt listened in astonishment What was it the boss was setting up a nation-wide man-hunt? He'd his own idea about the break-in It was the same pattern as the ten or more they'd been getting round the county in recent weeks, at big private houses with the owners away or out for the evening, where the safe or the strong-room or sometimes just the sideboard was opened up, and always for the same kind of loot silver Seemed to be content with that Likely they'd got a good fence for it and didn't want to be bothered with anything else But they weren't big-timeers, not by a long chalk Never tried anything fancy, just the middling jobs, good for a few hundred quid Coasters, that's all they were Coasting along nice and easy And up to now, chasing after them had never called for more than the same kind of coasting And here was Barlow turning it into a major op

'I'll be in conference for the next hour or so, d'you see . . .'

Watt seized on the next breath he took to interrupt him 'Sir it's a tuppenny-ha'penny break in this

'What d'you say?'

'It's these blokes who've been working all round the county We've had at least ten like it the last two months Same hallmarks as this one Tuppenny-ha'penny breaks all of them'

Barlow laid a fatherly hand on his shoulder 'Don't be daft, John With the Assistant Chief here, Mr Miller on his way, Mr Robbins likely called back from London Be reasonable, John

Lord Tenterton's house can't be a tuppenny-ha'penny break, can it!'

John Watt wasn't convinced. He wasn't any more convinced either when His Lordship called his own conference in the morning room to announce some grave news. There was Watt and Barlow and Assistant Chief Constable Harrison and Lord Tenterton himself and Lady Tenterton handing round some drinks. His Lordship stood there all tight-lipped until his missus had finished and gone out. Whatever he was going to say was clearly not for female ears. Even so, he made quite sure that none of the men going to and fro in the hall, forensics and lower rank detectives, should get a whiff of it either, waiting for Watt to shut the door fast before he breathed a whisper of what he had to say. When he did finally get to it, John Watt couldn't hardly believe his ears. According to His Lordship, what was in the safe apart from some bits of silver was not just stocks and shares or stamp collections but secrets. Ay, that was what he claimed, top secrets, state secrets—secret plans that any agent of a foreign power would give his right arm and his girl friend's honour to acquire. Something to do with what the Tenterton factory was producing on Government contract, and though His Lordship didn't exactly say it, he hinted it might not be a test tube away from a nuclear device. Well, John Watt knew the Tenterton factory, made turbines and tunnel arches and bridge sections—hulking great chunks of nonmongery, most of it. And as for Lord Tenterton himself, he might be Chairman of the Board, but they said around the works that he didn't know the back-end of a blast furnace from a pig's arse. If he had any plans to do with his factory locked up in his safe, then likely as not they were the plans of the new tea-trolley for the shop floor.

But whatever plans they were, they'd gone, been nicked by the thieves, and toffee-nosed Harrison was taking the loss of them seriously. First off, he wanted a list of everyone working at the factory, there'd be nigh on two thousand of those and what did he think he could do with the list when he'd got it? Then he wanted another list, mad on lists he was, of everyone who could have known what was in the safe. After that, and likely thinking that he'd need some help in sorting out the lists, he decided he was going to call in Scotland Yard, and Special Branch, and—just for good measure—take over Newtown nick as temporary headquarters. Mr Harrison probably hadn't enjoyed himself so much since the invasion scare of 1940 when they'd put him in charge of defending Blackpool Tower. His Lordship was clearly very much taken with the ACC's masterly command of the situation. It was only when Harrison decided that Lord Tenterton had better get hold of the works' Managing Director, that Watt noticed a

distinct cooling off in His Lordship's enthusiasm Seemed like he didn't mind half the police forces in the UK running around all night looking for his stolen papers, but when it came to getting his Managing Director out of bed he wasn't so keen Could it be that Mr Frith would only give His Lordship the horse's laugh?

Watt gave Mr Barlow his own opinion of His Lordship, as soon as he got the boss on his own 'You never believe him, do you sir?'

Barlow wasn't sure What was Sergeant Watt hinting at? That Lord Tenterton had connived at the theft himself?

Watt explained 'I don't think that at all I just think that he's stupid Keeps those papers at home, whatever they are, to show to his dinner guests Calling them "top secret" makes him feel big And they wouldn't know any different'

'Neither would I, John Never having had dinner there But Mr Harrison believes it'

'Got to, hasn't he?'

'Why?'

'Because he's Lord Tenterton When he condescends to send for the police'

Barlow held him with a steady look 'You don't Like Lord Tenterton, do you?'

John Watt had to admit it 'No'

'Is that why you don't believe him?'

Which wasn't a fair accusation Lots of people that John Watt didn't like, but that didn't stop him doing his duty by them He wasn't going by his feelings at all, he was going by the logic of it, the kind of crime it was, which he was sure was nothing to do with secret agents 'It's a tuppenny-ha'penny break, that's all'

Barlow raised doubts on that score 'They were clever, John. You've got to admit that Right amount of gelly That trick with the telephone All worked out More than a tuppenny-ha'penny break, don't you think?'

Well, Barlow had a point there Several But it still didn't call for all the fuss that Harrison was making 'Scotland Yard Special Branch MI5 CIA James Bond on the next plane from Jamaica He's going to make us look like idiots, you know. A right load of village idiots'

'He could be right'

'He's not'

Barlow stood there a moment, head down They both knew what was in the air between them, though there hadn't a word been said John Watt was determined to play it his own way, spite of Mr Harrison, spite of Lord Tenterton Barlow could take him off it, or send him home with a tactful dose of 'flu, or put him on another job the other side of the Division But he couldn't tell

him 'No, John' and pin him down to a line he didn't believe in. One thing though, if Watt did make a hash of it if they really were top secret papers and John Watt's pig-headedness stood in the way of getting them back. 'It's your career, John. Your head on the block. You know that, do you?'

He didn't wait for an answer, but turned away and left John Watt to think it over. When John Watt had thought, he called his lads together, the four crime patrol lads, clowns all of them, but each one as solid as a rock. Graham, Lynch, Smith and Weir. 'Now listen you lot.' He stood facing them, quiet and self-contained. 'I've gone out on a limb for every one of you in the past. Tonight, you are going to return the compliment.'

He explained his strategy to them, based on his absolute certainty that whoever had knocked off Lord Tenterton's house was the same lot as the silver merchants who'd been dodging about the county the previous couple of months. Which meant that whatever else they'd taken from the safe, what they'd gone for had been the silver, and it would be the silver they would try to flog. You don't flog stolen silver to foreign powers, you flog it to fences. And John Watt knew every fly fence within coughing distance of Newtown nick. There was a lot of them, too many to keep under observation in the hope of catching the silver thieves knocking at one of their back doors, but not so many that the four lads in the two cars couldn't nip round the lot before morning and drop a word of poison in their ears. Spreading that word could mean trouble. If John Watt was wrong and Lord Tenterton's top security story was right, then John Watt and the four Z Cars lads might even be clobbered for something or other to do with the Official Secrets Act. He couldn't order them to take that chance. He could only ask them. They all four put their caps on and walked to the door. 'Where do we start, sarge?'

John Watt never moved so fast as he did over the next few hours. He'd split the area into three chunks, one for each of the Z Cars and one for himself. Within his area he went from pubs to scrapyards to the back doors of pawnbrokers' shops, everywhere that one of his known fences carried on business or might be found, some of them had to be yocked out of beds or even in one case out of a brass's arms, and to each one he said more or less the same thing, 'watch it' and told them why. His clients were variously shocked, horrified or disgusted at what he told them, for there's no one more virtuous than a dishonest man when it comes to abhorrence of a particular form of skulduggery that he doesn't practise himself. And to a man they promised that if they had ever thought of buying any job lots of silver, they would certainly not buy the particular lot that Watt described to them, not merely

because it was stolen from Lord Tenterton's safe and they could be in trouble for fencing it, but because of the evil purpose of the fellows who'd done the safe, wicked fellows, treacherous fellows who'd get an honest crook a bad name

Watt returned from making his round and checked that the four lads had completed theirs as well. There was no more he could do now except wait and hope, like the hymn said. Barlow hadn't been waiting though. Barlow had been chasing like mad. He'd got his office set up like a mini-control room with map and markers and piles of statements and phone calls coming in and him ringing out. Only what he was mostly ringing for was Sergeant Watt or Sergeant Gregg or any of the lads. Hicks, Maycock, Little, Weir, Smith, well, Sexton Blake then. He wasn't around either. Never mind. He'd give John Watt the rough edge of his tongue, though, when he did catch up with him. Following his own nose was all right as long as it was only him following it, but dragging half of Newtown's crime lads along with him wasn't on. It just wasn't on! What must Mr Harrison be thinking? him and the other senior officers who'd come trooping along to Barlow's office. Flaming fury, there were more of them up there than he had lads on the ground. Just as well they didn't realize, 'cause if they did. Just where the blazes was everyone?

Jock and Fancy had finished the round of calls that Watt had sent them on and were on their way to what was going to turn out to be a very curious incident. Two men were reported playing catch as catch can with a couple of foot bobbies round about the Dockside, and Z Victor One being hard by at the time had been sent along to join in the chase. They'd just turned a couple of corners on their way there when they bumped straight into a fellow running like mad in the opposite direction. He reluctantly accepted their invite to take a seat between them. It wasn't long before all three of them caught up with the two foot bobbies escorting another fellow who hadn't been much good at running either. The two fellows were persuaded to introduce themselves as Walter Ferguson and Harry Pye, both of 14 Walton Lane, Tottenham, London, which was a long way for anyone to come from just to throw an old suitcase into the waters of Mersey Docks, and that, if nobody minded, was what they'd been about to do when the two foot bobbies caught them at it. Luckily the suitcase had been so heavy that it needed a right good whirl-around to toss it out far enough, and the whirler had only got as far as the backswing when he'd been interrupted by the bobbies' 'hey you!' At which point Walter Ferguson and Harry Pye had both decided that the best thing to do with the suitcase was to drop it on the cobblestones and walk away from it at a fast run, trying hard to look as if they'd never had owt to do with it. When Jock and Fancy went along to

pick it up it was quite clear why The suitcase lay busted open on the cobbles, scattered all round it was Lord Tenterton's silver

John Watt did a rapid check with Criminal Records in London on Walter Ferguson and Harry Pye By the time that Jock and Fancy delivered them up for questioning, he knew all he needed about them Two small-time safe-blowers they were, who the Met reckoned as a bit of a laugh, really Pity for them, that they'd come to Lancashire with their comedy routine Fourteen times they'd successfully performed it, which they wanted taking into account But the fifteenth performance was the one at Lord Tenterton's place, which might have turned out to be the biggest laugh of all if they hadn't been nicked in time to stop Mr Harrison from whistling up a full scale alert

Watt made a neat copy of all the particulars on Ferguson and Pye, ready for Mr Barlow who was on his way down When he'd got it set out it didn't look much Tuppenny-ha'penny breakers, like he'd said all along He handed it to Barlow who came in clutching another sheet of paper that he'd just been given by Blackitt, and which he'd been about to read when Lord Tenterton arrived to identify his silver Barlow saw him taken upstairs to be shown it by Mr Harrison There'd be some back-patting going on there all right There was no room for back-patting down here Just a job of work neatly done, needing to be neatly tied up He looked at the two villains sat in the CID office with Weir and Smith standing over them

'Not going to give us a lot of trouble, are you?'

'Admitting tonight's job, they are, sir,' Watt told him 'Want fourteen others taken into account It's all down there'

Barlow glanced at the two sheets of paper in his hands, the one given him by Blackitt and the one given him by Watt He put John Watt's on top and began reading it through One of the two villains shifted his feet and looked up 'Which one are you?' Barlow asked him

'Walter Ferguson and there's one thing I'd like to say'

'What's that?'

'We've not been treated fair' Barlow threw a look at the two crime car lads Had they been roughing the fellows up? But no, it wasn't that Walter Ferguson's complaint was an unusual one 'Someone's put it about that we're communists or something'

'Did they?'

'Yes, they did Spreading the word about all over. Putting the poison in We couldn't get no one to take the stuff off us because of that How we got caught Throwing it away Bloody reds, they called us Unpatriotic'

Barlow stared at him 'Is that right?'

'It's not true But it's what someone's been saying'

Barlow looked at John Watt 'Now I wonder who did that?'

Watt stared him back, po-faced 'Seems a right daft thing for anyone to do'

'Daft' He turned away abruptly and switched the sheets of paper he was clutching to read the one that Blackitt had given him Walter Ferguson was still complaining of his unfair treatment 'I tell you who it was . . . leastways who I think it was . . .'

Barlow rounded on him, his face hard 'Shut up Take them out'

For a moment no one moved Barlow was at his coldest and most savage as he spat out again, 'Take them out Charge them Breaking and entering, grievous bodily harm Put them away.'

Watt sensed that something was amiss He nodded to Jock and Fancy to go ahead with the two villains 'I'll come along in a minute'

Weir and Smith took the pair of safe-breakers out to be charged Mr Harrison, coming to find Barlow at that moment, asked him, 'Was that them?'

'Yes, sir' Barlow gave him the edge of his voice as he said 'Tuppenny-ha'penny break merchants, the pair of them. Lucky thing we found them before going to the United Nations.'

John Watt was gratified that Barlow had come round to seeing it his way, but surprised that he should be putting it so bluntly to the Assistant Chief Constable Had it got something to do with this sheet of paper he was still staring at?

Barlow held it out to Mr Harrison 'It's about Hulme, the handyman,' he explained 'Says here . . . where they coshed him . . . hit him on the back of the neck . . . seems it tapped the spinal column' He murmured to Watt, as Harrison took the hospital report to read for himself . . . 'General paralysis Might pull out of it Might not'

Harrison shoved the report back at him. 'D'you notice, sir,' said Barlow, ' . . . it's always the funny ones go sour'

The Assistant Chief Constable's mouth twitched once or twice. Barlow and Watt waited for him to say something like 'Unfortunate, but not our fault, you've done well even just 'good-night' What he did say was, 'Where are the papers?'

'Sir?'

'The papers from Lord Tenterton's safe Did they have them?'

'I don't know, sir' Barlow turned to Watt 'John?'

Watt swallowed hard 'I didn't ask'

'Then you should have done' Harrison let Barlow have his share of the ticking off 'Priorities, Barlow First things first. You'd better get after them, hadn't you See if they ever had them And if they did, what they've done with them'

The two villains told them Yes, they had taken the papers.

Taken everything in the safe just in case it happened to be of value Shoved it all in the suitcase The suitcase . which had burst open on the Dockside where the wind blew harsh across the cobblestones towards the waters of the Mersey, where Jock and Fancy had not even noticed the mass of scattered papers already blown some distance from the silver they were picking up By the time that John Watt could get down there to look for Lord Tenterton's papers they were already floating out to sea upon the Mersey tide, and not a single foreign spy was there to pick them up

Don't Tell Me, Let Me Guess

(from the television script by Robert Burr)

THE ONE ANNOYING THING about Charlie Barlow, the one thing that got John Watt really narked, was how often Barlow was right Choose which way he went about it, he nearly always finished up cock-a-hoop, case sorted, with that smug 'I told you so' look on his face Not that John Watt doubted his own ability to get there his own way But his way was slow and painstaking, while Barlow's tended to be quick and intuitive Get a hunch, and follow it A tube of lipstick, a tin of meat, a pair of gloves, Barlow was a snapper-up of such unconsidered trifles out of which he would make a watertight case against some unfortunate villain Who was it that did do a stretch on the strength of some such trifles? Welsh name Jones? Morgan? it was during Crime Squad days at Wyvein Watt riffled through the files of that period, trying to find the particular case that was nudging the corner of his mind

It was, as he remembered, not long after he and Barlow had settled in with the South-West Regional Crime Squad, part of the country-wide network carrying out the latest policy of 'chasing the criminal, and not the crime' Concentrate on the big villains, the known villains, keep tabs on them non-stop from Christmas to breakfast-time, set yourself the target of being there whenever they try to pull a job, lean on them when they're not even thinking of pulling a job, make it so tough for them that they'll give up crime Sounded all right, and a lot of it did work, particularly the 'keeping tabs' bit What it missed out on, though, was that in the cops and robbers game the initiative invariably lies with the villain No crime no investigation You can't send a fellow down until he's actually pulled a job, and the only effective way of keeping most of those beggars out of mischief was to send them down As for the reforming bit well, John Watt would never

come straight out and say it was hopeless, but in his experience the vast majority of pro villains only ever gave it up when they were too old and past it

Ay it was a fellow like that was mixed up in the case he was thinking of Fellow they called Dad something He was sure it was a Welsh name Dad Evans? Dad Williams? Funny little fellow, looked like an ex-jockey; used to go about punching one hand into the other, like a boxer keeping his fists in good nick, only in Dad's case, what the punching was for was to ease the arthritic pains which so crippled his old hands that he could no longer keep up with his particular caper of safe-breaking.

That was it safe-breaking It was a file on safe-breakings that John Watt was hunting for Not the neat-fingered, open-the-combination-lock kind of safe-breakings that Dad used to get up to, but a series of safe-blowings with explosives that started off as clumsily done as a Laurel and Hardy removal job It was something in the amateur way of it that had set Barlow off on a line that led to Dad? Dad? Dad Owen! And his son was mixed up in it too. Or was it two sons?

Name of Owen and a Regional Crime Squad investigation, starting off with a number of safe-blowings reported from different parts of the Wyvern area Got it now Watt slid the file out of the cabinet and flipped it open Clipped together at the back were the listed accounts of those safe-blowings, juggled about in three different ways, by date order, grouped in districts, and sorted according to amounts of cash taken; the correlation technique that he and Barlow had made the cornerstone of their Crime Squad investigations

Jim Cook would have prepared those lists Detective Inspector J Cook, who came to the Crime Squad as Intelligence Officer, after his leg got smashed in a set-to with some villains. Watt remembered how it took him a little time to get settled to the desk job, but once he got the hang of it he turned out to be darned good He remembered, too, that Barlow had been particularly complimentary on the way these safe-blowing statistics had been prepared, sitting behind the desk in his Wyvern office, with the typewritten lists laid out in front of him, while Jim Cook and John Watt had to balance their copies on their knees, shuffling them to and fro in the effort to see some significant pattern emerging

Watt had given up the struggle 'It's just a load of tuppenny-ha'penny jobs put together'

Barlow gave him a quizzical look 'I seem to have heard something like that before Remember, John?'

Watt nodded He hadn't forgotten the run of safe-blowings back at Newtown which had ended up with Lord Tenterton's safe being

done He'd had his argy-bargy with Barlow over that lot, and been proved in the right Well, things were different now The safe-blowings were different, more of an epidemic than a run His relationship with Barlow was different, they were more of a team now And the process of thief-catching was different, with a lot more methodology to it Yet here they were arguing the toss again, and he'd maybe show Barlow who was right again Watt folded his arms and stated firmly, 'Tuppenny-ha'penny jobs whichever way you look at them'

Barlow pointed out, 'They add up to £83,642 That isn't tuppence ha'penny'

Watt shrugged off the significance 'You could get a similar result by adding up any handful of jobs'

'They do have things in common, John Not all of them, but some of them We should know which It's what we're in business for Taking a long look at things and spotting what lies behind' He turned to Inspector Cook 'Jim'

Cook explained 'I put these forty jobs together, sir, because they're all medium weight All done for wages All done the night before the pay-out'

Watt was far from convinced 'Doesn't mean that they're done by the same fellows Everybody has a go at wages Next to football, it's the national sport'

Cook continued, 'The twenty marked with a cross are picked out from the others because they are all on main roads Nothing big Four or five thousand wage bill'

Watt persisted in his criticisms of Jim Cook's theories 'If we're picking out those with similarities we could do it another way There's several that stand out because they were ham-fisted In fact there are two that didn't come off at all, safe doors buckled and wouldn't open On the other hand, there's several which stand out because they were particularly neat That could give us two different teams of safe-blowers, for a start, one lot expert, the other lot rank amateurs It could even be three teams, or four teams Where do we stop?'

Barlow was enjoying himself, setting his two subordinates one against the other, while he, like the conjuror he was, kept his own theory tucked up his sleeve to be produced at a more favourable moment

Meanwhile it was Jim Cook's turn for crystal-gazing seeing patterns in the jumble of statistics before them 'Another element common to some of them, sir, those I've marked with the letter P, is petty-thieving, pilfering'

John Watt began to show an interest 'You mean knock-offs from the same places where a safe was blown, and at the same time?'

'Yes Only trifling things Cigarettes from the canteen Three bottles of scent from a showcase That sort of thing'

It was unusual to have pilfering at the same time as safe-blowing Why bother with a few packets of fags when you're in for several thousand pounds? Watt was almost prepared to accept this as a significant common factor occurring in ten out of the forty safe-blowings Except that it conflicted with his own correlation into neat jobs and clumsy jobs, since six of the ten were neat and the other four were ham-fisted It was all a bit of flying in cloud cuckoo land He was glad when the conference was finally packed in with a word of exhortation from Barlow 'We'll leave it at that I'll expect you to think it over, come up with something a little more concrete later on', he darted a look at the two dissentients, 'like being in agreement.'

Once outside Mr Barlow's office, Jim Cook's resentment came to the surface 'I could have done with some support, John.'

Watt was indignant 'I was helping all right Pointing out what didn't fit Reducing it to ten'

'The pilfering ones you think there's a link there?'

'To my mind, yes'

'I had something in mind on that score, too But I didn't have time to say it'

'Mr Barlow's like that Starts a meeting, stops it in the middle' Watt poured a little oil on Jim Cook's ruffled feelings 'We've got time now, Jim What was on your mind?'

'About the pilfered goods there's a café that's got a name for it You know the sort of thing Want to buy a cheap transistor? fell off the back of a lorry Sam's Café In Dock Street'

Watt showed no sign of putting on his hat and dashing over to Dock Street Cook shrugged it off 'It was just a thought'

There he goes, thought John Watt, touchy again. Better do something 'Digby!' he called to the youngest and rawest of the Crime Squad detective constables

Digby came over to them, tall and gangling 'There's a café in Dock Street Sam's,' Watt told him 'They tell me the pie and chips are very good down there'

Digby stared at John Watt out of his saucer eyes, he wasn't adept yet at picking up hints, needed it spelling out So Watt spelled it 'Get over there, lad Keep your ears open, see what you can pick up I want to know'

Digby's report on the whispers picked up in Sam's Café wasn't very informative His eavesdropping had nearly been spoiled at the start by his having been recognized as a copper by, of all people, old Dad Owen Digby saw the old fellow shuffling round the tables, peering into the faces of the lorry drivers who used

the café for one familiar friend whom he could touch for a meal or the price of a few pints of beer. Not one of them looked back at him. He edged over to the counter and asked for a mug of tea which Sam, knowing the old scrounger's ways, only handed over when the four copper coins in payment for it were passed across. Dad Owen cupped his creaking, knobbly fingers round the hot mug of tea, letting the warmth of it ease his arthritic pains, as he looked for a place to sit. It was then that he saw Digby, and his face brightened. The lad was a good lad for a copper, a soft-spoken west country boy. Dad liked him. He parked himself at the same table. 'Hello, Mr Digby!' and added quietly, 'Something up then?'

Digby shook his head. Dad was relieved. 'I don't like trouble. And you being here. I thought.'

Digby indicated the plate of food in front of him as a good enough reason for his being there, and turned the questioning on Dad's own reason. 'You looking for someone?'

Dad Owen's eyes slid away as he said 'no'. But Digby wasn't much concerned if the old man was lying. He was so clearly down and out that he couldn't have been up to anything much that would be of interest to the Regional Crime Squad. The old fellow's jersey looked as if it was made of damp string, and the raincoat over it was nearly in tatters. The gloves sticking out of the pocket, though, they didn't fit. Digby pulled one of them out and looked it over. A nearly new glove, brown kid, fur lined, the name 'Fox' on the label. That was a good make, an expensive make. 'You're not back at it?' he asked the old man.

Dad denied the implication. 'They're not pinched, Mr Digby. They were given me as a birthday present.'

'Who'd give you presents?'

'I've got family. I've got grandchildren now.'

'They look after you?'

'No.' The old man's voice was bitter as he told Digby, 'I've got three sons. Two married. They don't want to know.'

Digby had heard enough of the old man's woes, and anyway the only customers in the café in whom he had any interest were then leaving. Tom Matthews and Jack Gregory, two lorry men, both of them known to the Regional Crime Squad as being on the fringe of criminal activities. As for Sam's pie and chips, it wasn't what Mr Watt had cracked it up to be. Digby left the rest of it, and got up to pay his bill. Dad's posh new glove was still clutched in his hand. He chucked it back at the old man. 'How would you like a pie and chips yourself?'

Dad looked at him dumbly. He'd come in to get a hand-out from a friend, and was being offered it by a copper. Never trust a copper, they always said. But what had he got of any value for the copper to screw out of him? He didn't know nothing, he

wasn't mixed up in nothing Not any more He followed Digby to the counter and watched him put down the two silver coins for the meal When Digby had gone the old man made to pick up the coins for himself, but Sam was too quick for him He snatched the money away and slammed down the steaming plate of pie and chips 'No you don't, Dad,' Sam told him 'That hand-out wasn't for booze The fellow said to give you something to eat'

Watt and Cook were only mildly interested in the information brought back by Digby from Sam's Café So what if Matthews and Gregory had been seen there? What was more immediately occupying their minds was another safe-blowing which had followed the pattern of the ten already picked out a safe broken open overnight for the eighteen thousand pound wage bill of a cosmetics factory, while at the same time the adjacent dispatch room had been entered and two dozen lipsticks taken from a carton It didn't make sense With eighteen thousand pounds to share out between three or four, why bother with a handful of lipsticks? And if the lipsticks were for flogging, why only two dozen and not the full carton?

It was high time for Barlow to spring his own theory 'The way I see it,' he told his subordinates, 'is this We now have eleven safe-blowings, all following exactly the same pattern'

'Not quite, sir,' Watt interrupted 'Seven of them were done by an expert, four by a duff amateur'

'The first four, John,' Barlow pointed out 'Remember that. I'll get to the reason for it later But the starting point is someone getting information Someone who moves around these factories, calls at these places, finding out what there is and when it can be taken'

Cook queried this 'Sir do you mean someone like a delivery man?'

'Yes'

'But they're all different kinds of places' He referred to the lists 'Engineering, laundry, cosmetics, another laundry, scaffolding'

Barlow halted the flow 'They all have offices'

'Yes, sir'

'So offices use stationery Could be a delivery man for a wholesale stationers They all have works canteens?'

'I believe so, sir'

'Grocery deliveries, then Or fuel oil There's all sorts of possibilities You can check them Whoever he is, he marks his card Then contacts someone who can get a safe-blower Between them, they set up a team Only a third division team But still, it's a start'

'Until the cash starts rolling in' Watt suggested

'Right' Barlow leaned back in the big swivel chair, enjoying the exposition 'At first it's small two thousand from the first job, another two thousand, and then a botched-up job and they get nothing'

'There were two botched-up jobs, sir,' Watt reminded him 'And the two that did come off weren't so clever'

Barlow nodded 'They were the first four I told you to bear that in mind By this time they have enough money to ditch the first safe-blower and get themselves a better one . move up the league do the more expert jobs But apart from the safe-blower, it's still the same team'

'Because of the pilfering' Cook was delighted that his early analysis was being vindicated

Barlow turned the spotlight of his attention upon the pilferer 'Someone who has nothing to do while the safe is being done Like the driver or the look-out Wanders around while he's waiting for the others and takes whatever he can pocket'

Cook referred to his lists again 'That fits, sir Arnold Engineering some cigarettes from the canteen, eight packets, only what he could put in his pocket. Snow-White Laundry. some tins of meat from the canteen Wyvern Scaffolding a pair of gloves from the manager's office If we could trace any of them I could list the goods and get the lads to keep a look-out'

Barlow agreed 'It's worth trying For my money, the pilferer's the weak link'

John Watt doubted it, bearing in mind that Digby had already made one abortive visit to Sam's Café, there simply wasn't enough of the pilfered goods for anyone to flog Still, it would keep Jim Cook happy, making out more lists

Digby sat in his car on the dockside studying the list of pilfered goods The one item that had leaped out at him when he first read it through was the pair of gloves He'd said nothing about it to his bosses, didn't want to make a fool of himself old Dad Owen mixed up with a team of safe-blowers getting away with thousands? Not likely . look at the old man's clothes, look at his hungry face Still it was a coincidence, a pair of gloves missing Similar pair of gloves incongruously covering old Dad Owen's crippled hands. Worth following it up, worth finding out if Dad had any more of the missing goods Pick him up and ask him a few casual questions

Digby was a patient lad He'd been parked on the same spot for over an hour This was part of Dad's beat, near the café, near his 'drum', as good a place as any for a deliberately casual meeting with the old man He unwrapped the last of his tube of mints

and popped it in his mouth. It was warm in the car. Better than being out on the street in that biting wind from off the river.

Dad Owen came along the dockside, huddled into the wind, occasionally taking his gloved hands from his pockets and pounding them one against the other. That was better; eased the pain for a few minutes, but it came back again, always came back again. And there wasn't anyone had a scrap of sympathy for him, not Jerry, not the other two boys. They didn't want to know their Dad, blamed him for all the years he'd spent in jail, as if it was his fault. He'd never really neglected them, always thought about them when he was away, and always left enough money with their ma to keep them in food and clothing. Well, if not always, whenever he could. And now when he needed them, they'd turned their backs on him. They knew darned well he couldn't fend for himself, had no trade, no savings, no pension, no nothing. It was being so long in the nick was the trouble. All those years! But he'd pulled some good jobs to earn it. He was class in his day. Coax a safe open, he would. These young fellows, what did they know but muscle and gelignite. Jelly boys! Jelly-babies. . . soft but no heart. His Jerry had no heart. Washing his hands of his old Dad. It was Jerry's girl friend was the only one who ever showed him a kindness. Gertrude Murphy. Trudy Murphy. . . Trudy! Plump and comfortable. Ought to be married with a pack of kids instead of knocking around with Jerry. Treated old Dad like a kid, though. Bossed him, jawed him off for being so dirty, fed him when she could, and as much as Jerry spoke against it, she always paid his rent. Ay, and more that Jerry didn't know. She gave him things, out of her own cupboard. He felt in his pockets for what she'd given him that day, the square tin hard and comforting under his knobbly fingers.

Digby saw him coming along the street, like an old piece of rag blown along by the wind. If he squeezed the rag hard enough it might yield a drop or two of information. He tapped on the window to attract the old man's attention, and opened the near-side door for him.

'Get in, Dad. It's warmer in here.'

The old man got in. Digby looked at his peaky face, at the worn and greasy clothes. 'Things still bad?' Dad nodded.

They sat in silence for a moment until Dad asked, 'You after somebody?'

Digby's voice was carefully casual. 'No. Just driving around.' He looked down at his bare hands on the steering wheel. 'Cold work. Could do with a pair of gloves like yours. Let's see them.'

There was very little about Dad Owen that anyone envied, it pleased him that Digby was casting his eyes on his spanking new gloves. He took them off importantly and handed them over.

Digby felt them, turned the cuff back to examine the lining and remind himself of the name on the label 'A present, you said?'

'Bought for me birthday, they were To keep me hands warm'

'Someone must like you'

'They do' He couldn't keep it to himself 'Trudy'

'Who's she?'

'Jerry's girl friend Jerry's me youngest son'

'What's her address?'

Dad was startled, that was a copper's question, this wasn't coppers' business though, nothing to do with Mr Digby where Trudy lived Of course, it didn't matter if Mr Digby was told; Trudy had come by the gloves honest Still, if Jerry got to know about her giving him things He skipped round the question, indignantly insisting, 'She bought the gloves for me For me birthday They were new'

'When was your birthday, Dad?'

Dad didn't answer Digby began to put the squeeze on 'What else have you got?' And noticing the old man's twitchiness he demanded, 'Turn out your pockets Come on'

Slowly, reluctantly, Dad Owen took from his coat pocket a small package wrapped in newspaper Digby opened it Inside was a tin of spiced meat Digby didn't even need to refer to the list of pilfered goods the brand name on the tin was the same as on the two dozen taken from the canteen of the Snow-White Laundry when their safe was done

'She gave it me to take home,' Dad told him, ' from her larder, Something for me to eat It isn't nicked'

'We'll find out,' said Digby 'What's her address?'

'I'm not giving it'

'Then we'll go to the station' Digby made as if to start the car

The old man was crumbling now, trying to protect the one person who had been kind to him, yet desperately afraid for himself He insisted again, 'They're not nicked.'

'They are'

'It wasn't me that did it'

'You always blame somebody else Trudy, you said'

'I didn't say it was her She's good to me, Mr Digby She looks after me' He made an effort to take the blame off her. 'It was Jerry'

'There you go First it's Trudy Then it's Jerry'

'Anyway it's only a tin of meat You can buy them anywhere'

Digby played along with this pretence that there was nothing to it 'All right. The tin of meat was bought in a shop The gloves were a present'

'That's right'

'Then you can give me her address'

The old man still refused Digby's long lugubrious face looked sadder still as he said, 'Okay then The station'

Dad was really frightened now, he didn't so much mind coppers' threats when they were cheerful, but it terrified him when they were sad about it There was nothing more frightening than a self-righteous copper He cracked at last 'It's 23 Bilton Road'

Digby carefully copied it down 'And what's her full name?'

'It's Gertrude Murphy'

That, too, went down in the little book Digby opened the nearside door 'You can get out now, Dad'

The old man lingered 'Can I have me gloves?'

'No You can have this keep you out of trouble'

Dad Owen looked at the three silver coins dropped in the palm of his hand Never in all his time had he split on anyone, neither for money nor revenge 'I'm not a grass, Mr Digby' His voice was hoarse, near to tears Digby was unmoved 'No, you're not a grass So don't tell anyone what we talked about, and I won't say you told me'

The old man's fingers slowly closed on the three silver coins; he got out of the car clutching them tightly, it was a lot of beer money, all the same . He turned on Digby and fiercely insisted, 'I would never have told you' Then he stuffed the coins in his pocket and shuffled away, thumping his ungloved hands against each other

John Watt had his own way of tackling the investigation of the series of safe-blowings chase the criminal, not the crime. Those last seven safe-blowings, now, they'd been done by someone with real class, one of the top-bracket safe-blowers There weren't so many of them in the whole country so few in fact that they were like prima donnas, brought in to play the leading role in a production at a fee usually paid in advance, on top of their part of the share-out. They weren't even necessarily local. A 'blower' might be recruited in Glasgow, brought down to Devon to do the job, and be on the train back to Bonnie Scotland the next morning So, from Bonnie Scotland to Glorious Devon, John Watt listed every expert safe-blower known to the police They were long lists to start with, but by the time that he and Jim Cook had eliminated all those who couldn't possibly have taken part in all seven robberies those who were in jail, or under observation, or busy blowing safes in other parts of the country . they were left with only two possibles And of those two, Watt favoured one named Alec Wilson It was said of Wilson that he never even took part in the breaking and entering that preceded, or the clearing of the cash that followed the actual blowing of the safe He would wait for the others to break in, carry out the preparations,

and give him the word then he strolled in with his little bag of tricks, blew the safe, and walked straight out again meeting his mates later on at a discreet rendezvous to collect his share of the loot. A right cunning fellow, this Wilson only two brief possible moments to nab him the moment of blowing the safe, and the moment of being handed the cash. John Watt would dearly love to catch him at one of those moments.

He was pressing this line with Barlow and Cook, when young Digby returned to the office, and not wishing to interrupt the conversation, threw on his desk the pair of gloves and the tin of meat. The three senior officers ceased their chat to look at his trophies, recognizing them at once as being identical with two of the items on Cook's pilfering list.

'Where did you get them?' Watt demanded of Digby.

'From Dad Owen. Says they were a present from a woman Gertrude Murphy. Girl friend of Jerry Owen.'

'That's a lot of Owens,' said Watt.

Cook, the local man, knew the Owen family well. 'There's even more of them. Old Dad had three sons. Mike has been inside several times. So has Eddie. Jerry has had Borstal.'

'Borstal?' Watt picked up the tin of meat. 'Would this be about his mark?'

Cook nodded. Barlow was turning over the glove in his hand, feeling it, sensing it. 'Get Jerry Owen in,' he said abruptly.

Watt wasn't too keen on the idea. A petty thief mixed up with the safe-blowers? Possibly. But going for him was, in John Watt's opinion, the wrong way of going about it. Maybe if they had a bit more evidence . . . like finding any more tins of meat, or lipsticks, or any other of the pilfered property at this Gertrude Murphy's place. Need a policewoman for that. He gave Policewoman Detective Sergeant Barbara Allin the necessary instructions, then returned to his own line of approach, concentrating on the heavy brigade, the blower himself. 'Sir, this fellow Wilson now.'

Barlow interrupted. 'I want Jerry Owen in first, John. And I don't want anyone to see him being brought in.'

John Watt knew better than to argue with the boss in this mood, like a hound dog on the scent, he was; you couldn't pull him off. What the heck had he sniffed out, though, between a pair of gloves and Jerry Owen?

Jerry Owen was a bit like his dad must have been as a young man. A well built young fellow, but neat and light-footed with it. He came along quite cheerfully when Digby went to pick him up, leaving his parcels delivery van parked in the yard where Digby had been told he would find him. At the station where he was taken for questioning he seemed cheerful enough, relaxing

in his chair across the table from John Watt in the bare, forbidding interview room, his only complaint being that he felt cold without the jacket which had been taken away from him to be searched

There wasn't much found in the jacket that could be thought of as incriminating, a few odds and ends of personal effects, cigarettes, keys, and a diary. There were entries in the diary, crosses which could have meant anything, and names and addresses which were clearly those of the various places where Jerry made his daily collections and deliveries. There was one entry in the diary for that particular day which Barlow found interesting 'Café 7 30'

'What café would that be?' he asked Jim Cook 'Any idea?'

Cook thought a moment. Old Dad Owen had been seen at Sam's Café. It was likely that he'd been there looking for Jerry, hoping to scrounge off him. And with Sam's being a favourite hang-out for transport men, particularly the light-fingered ones, like Jerry.

He told Barlow, 'I'd say Sam's Café, at the Docks.'

'Uh-huh!' Barlow was beginning to purr a bit now, like a big-self-satisfied tom-cat. Trifles trifles but they added up. 'See who's meeting at the café at 7 30. And what have we got from the girl friend's place?'

The haul at Trudy's had been more than satisfactory. Three more tins of meat of the same kind as the one already taken from Dad Owen, three bottles of perfume, and two dozen lipsticks, all identified by brand names as being identical to various items on Cook's pilfered property list. Trudy had made no effort to conceal her possession of the stolen property, and it was clear from what she'd said that she'd got it all from Jerry. Barlow rubbed his hands, with what he'd got now he'd have little difficulty in cracking Jerry wide open, and if his hunch was right, what would come spilling out would be the full details of the safe-blowings, names and all. He pocketed the bits of evidence of Jerry's pilfering activities and went to the interview room. From the doorway, he looked hard at Jerry, nodded in a self-satisfied manner, then turned to say to Watt in a just audible whisper, 'John. I think we're on to something here. You go with Jim Cook.'

Jerry wasn't impressed, he'd had this sort of treatment before. He took the jacket which Barlow slung across to him, put it on, squared his shoulders and asked, 'Can I go as well?'

Barlow shook his head. 'You stay here.'

'Why?'

Barlow came up very close to him, almost nose to nose, and murmured in his silkiest tone, 'Because I say so. Sit down.'

Barlow wasn't much impressed with Jerry Owen either. The over-cocky ones weren't that tough, they talked too much, thought they were saying nothing, but it was what they left out that always gave them away. He placed in front of Jerry a slip of paper with the names and addresses of the eleven places which now figured on Jim Cook's list of connected safe-blowings. Jerry looked at it.

'You call at all these places,' said Barlow.

'Some of them.'

'All of them,' Barlow insisted.

Jerry shrugged. 'All right. So I do. What of it?'

'At every one a safe has been done.'

Jerry laughed. Barlow shook his head sadly. 'I don't think it's funny.'

'It's got to be a joke, hasn't it? I mean, I'm not the only driver who calls at places. I'm a parcels man, collect and deliver. I call at a lot of other places as well.'

'But at each of these a safe was done.'

'Don't look at me.'

Barlow changed his tack. 'Where were you last night?'

'Birmingham.'

'Last night?'

'Sure.'

Barlow felt in his pocket as though he was going to fish from it some evidence to the contrary. What he produced was a tube of lipstick. 'Seen this before?'

Jerry hardly looked at it. 'You can buy them anywhere.'

Barlow was rolling it backwards and forwards along the table under his fingers. Jerry gave it a closer look. 'That's right. Buy them in any chemists.' He asked Barlow cheekily, 'Want some?'

'I want two dozen,' Barlow carefully spelled out the quantity.

'Do you always joke like this?'

Barlow's response was to take from his pockets, one by one, the remaining twenty-three lipsticks, standing the whole lot upright on the table in two rows like a column of toy soldiers. Flanking them, he put the four tins of spiced meat that had been recovered, and at the head of his martial column he placed the three bottles of perfume. It was all done slowly with immense care and infinite patience, as though the geometrical placing of them was the only thing he had on his mind. When he had done, he looked across at Jerry with a beaming smile. 'Now!'

Jerry was equally amused. 'What are you going to do with that lot?'

Barlow's smile was suddenly wiped from his face. 'I'm going to tell you a story, lad. One that will frighten the wits out of you.' 'Yeah? I'd like to hear it.'

'Soon. I want to know first . . . These were found at your girl friend's place You gave them to her Where did you get them?' 'I got offered them'

'Stolen property'

Jerry explained, as though to a child 'It isn't stolen Cases get broken A bit of "knock" gets taken It goes on all the time A driver calling at different places gets offered it'

And you buy it?'

'Are you going to charge me with it? All this lark because you can buy a few things on the side? I told you . I just bought them cheap'

And I told you I was going to scare the wits out of you'

'You're not doing too well' He looked more confident, more cheeky than ever

Barlow's thick fingers carefully separated the lipsticks, and the tins of meat, and the bottles of perfume into three separate lots 'Every place you bought these, a safe was blown'

'Am I supposed to have done that, too?'

'Yes'

'You've got the wrong Owen It's my old man who did safes.'

Barlow recalled what he'd been told about old Dad Owen 'Your old man was like an eel He could get in any place He could do locks He could wheedle a safe open But he never blew one in his life So leave him out of it'

Jerry was contemptuous 'He couldn't do a piggy bank now.' Could you?'

'Me? I couldn't do a safe I wouldn't know how to start'

Barlow leaned across the table This was it This was what he'd been leading up to 'Tell me who did blow those safes Two names One who did the first four and the one who's doing them now'

Jerry looked back and forth from the list of blown safes to the heap of pilfered goods 'You're going to do me with nicking this lot?' he asked

Barlow nodded 'For a start'

'Then get on with it' Jerry leaned back in his chair, as far as he was concerned the questioning was over Barlow looked at his watch It was nearly half past seven

John Watt was waiting in the squad car with Cook and Digby They were parked against a loading bay across the road from Sam's Café Sam had been co-operative when Cook went in to talk to him They knew each other well, there was an understanding between them, Inspector Cook turned a blind eye to the knock-off trading that brought such a healthy clientele to the café, in return, Sam gave him the whisper on his clients, some of

those whispers had resulted in arrests for far bigger jobs than the odd case of goods taken off the back of a lorry. On this occasion, Sam's finger had pointed out two fellows whom Cook knew at once. They were the two villains whose names had come up the previous day as a result of Digby's visit to the café. Tom Matthews and Jack Gregory. According to Sam, they'd met Jerry Owen at his café on previous occasions.

As the minutes ticked by, to seven-thirty and past it, Watt tried to work out if there was anything in the lead they were following. Was it Jerry and Matthews and Gregory working together on the safe-blowings, with a fourth man, the unknown expert, to make up the team? Had they been there yesterday to join up with Jerry before pulling the job, and were they waiting on him now for the share-out to follow? Jim Cook had said they seemed impatient. They'd soon realize that Jerry wasn't going to show up. Would they go on to do whatever it was they'd met for without him? Or abandon whatever it was and go home? Maybe they'd only meant to talk, anyway. It was all very chancy flying kites in a shifting wind and meanwhile Mr Barlow was growing impatient sending radio messages. Anything to report from his Crime Squad car?

John Watt got out of the car to take a sniff around. It was nearly fifteen minutes after the time of the meet. Perhaps he'd wander into the café and see what was doing.

As he was about to close the door, Cook grabbed his arm. 'Here they come.'

The two men stood in the café doorway were Matthews and Gregory. They waited a few moments as though they were giving someone a last chance to catch up with them before they left, and then set off along Dock Street. Watt followed on foot. When they'd all three got a little way ahead, Digby started up the car and began to creep it along in pursuit.

A few hundred yards along there was a side street which led to a quiet parking yard. Digby remembered it as the same yard where he'd picked up Jerry Owen several hours before, and where Jerry's van was presumably still standing. Matthews and Gregory turned down this side street. Watt closed up a bit as he followed. From the shadow of a doorway at the corner he saw Matthews walk across to a parked car and tap at the window. The window was wound down from inside. Matthews took a bulky package from his coat pocket, watched by Gregory a few yards away, and by Watt from the corner. Watt felt a momentary sense of elation. This could be it, the fellow in the car could be the safe-blower, the expert, collecting his share from the previous night's robbery. But the set-up to catch them wasn't right. There were too few Crime Squad men and they weren't well placed. It had been too

rushed, too hurried, and there was nothing he could do about it now except take a chance on jumping the villains before they went their separate ways. He signalled to the Crime Squad car which switched on its headlights and came roaring up to seal the exit from the side street as Watt ran to the villain's car where the money was being handed over. Behind him, he could already hear Digby and Cook as they got out of the car and ran on after him, it was three against three, they had a fair chance.

Matthews and Gregory, startled by the arrival of the car, turned and ran the opposite way towards the parking yard, Matthews still clutching the package which he'd been about to hand over. Digby peeled off in pursuit of Matthews, and Cook went after Gregory, while Watt wrenched open the door of the parked car and hauled the driver out. The dim light of the street lamp fell upon his face and Watt felt a kick of self-satisfaction as he recognized him from among the batch of mug-shot photographs of known safe-blowers. It was Alec Wilson, the one that John Watt had himself picked out as favourite. But it wasn't much good having Wilson on his own.

Cook had caught up with Gregory. Before he could grab him, the big fellow turned and butted him in the face. Cook went down as Gregory's toe thudded forward, crashing into his game leg. He curled up to protect his guts from the capped toe that kept swishing forward, and succeeded, by rolling away, in half rising to his feet as Gregory jumped him again with a knee in his face.

Young Digby, seeing the Inspector go down for a second time, left his pursuit of Matthews and dodged through the parked vehicles, getting to Gregory just as he was about to put his toe in yet again. Digby, for all his gangling innocent look, was a tough nut in a fight. His knee came up and jabbed the crouching Gregory in the kidneys, his clenched fist thudded behind the big fellow's ear, and while Gregory's knees were slowly buckling, Digby hit him once more in the same place. 'That one was for you, sir,' he said to Jim Cook.

He turned away, looking for Matthews again, there was a high wall all the way round the yard, he couldn't have got far. The rattle of shod feet on metal drew his attention. He ran to where it came from. Matthews was on top of a lorry cab, scrambling up on to the roof, which brought him within fingertip reach of the wall beyond. As Digby pounded towards the lorry, Matthews flung the package in his hand over the wall, leapt for the coping, grabbed hold and pulled himself over. There was a thud from the other side, and his footsteps on the cobblestones were already fading away as Digby hauled himself up to the top of the wall. There was no one in sight on the quayside, the only movement was the mackerel flash of the Severn stream. Digby

dropped back to the lorry roof and clambered down to the ground. He'd cop hell from Mr Watt for letting the fellow go. As for Mr Barlow.

When Barlow was told of it by Watt, he was nowhere near as apoplectic as Digby had imagined he would be. Charlie Barlow knew that it was in part his fault for interfering in his subordinates' handling of the investigation. It was not as though his own line of pursuit was paying off, he'd had to admit to Watt that Jerry Owen had not said a word yet.

John Watt felt that he had to speak his mind, and he didn't care if he did get choked off for it, it was high time someone told Charlie Barlow. 'It's a daft way to go about cracking a safe-blowing team. What's it brought us so far! We've got three fellows: Gregory for assaulting a police officer, Owen suspected of petty thieving, and Wilson claiming that he was just a bystander.'

'We'll get Owen for more than pilfering.'

'Maybe, but there's nothing to connect him with Gregory on the one hand or Wilson on the other.'

'Haven't they said anything?' Barlow demanded.

'Yes. That they don't know each other. Wilson insists that while he was sitting in his car, two fellows came up and asked him about a van.'

'What does Gregory say?'

'What do you expect? The same thing.'

'He and Matthews just happened to pass that way?' and it just happened to be Wilson sitting there.'

'You can't charge them with that. And there's no evidence of anything else. The squad car scared them and Matthews made off with the pay-off, I think. The others have nothing.'

'Damn.' Barlow's anger was rising now. 'I want Matthews brought in.'

'What for? He'll have got rid of whatever it was in the packet he was carrying.' The old beggar was still interfering, and it was best to say so. 'With respect, sir, I think it's being done the wrong way round.'

Barlow rounded on him.

'You'd have done better.'

John Watt couldn't say that he believed he would, but he was determined to make his point. 'The pilfering Jerry Owen.'

That was only a lead. Nothing more. If we'd followed it up quietly, we'd have been watching Owen, and watching his van. Where he parks it is where they were meeting Wilson. We'd have spotted them all meeting, and been in a position to take them without any bother. Instead it was just a mess-up and Inspector Cook got hurt.'

Barlow turned the accusation. 'You let Matthews get away That hasn't helped'

'Digby let him go to save Jim Cook from a mangling He's after him again now We did get Wilson and Gregory'

Barlow choked back his bile, his anger now turning in on himself 'I want Jerry Owen put in with those two,' he said quietly

Watt just looked at him It was daft, Jerry Owen wasn't going to lead them anywhere, and putting him in with the other two villains would only give the three of them a chance to polish up whatever phoney story they were going to tell

But Barlow was already playing a cunning game of his own He left the three villains alone together for just long enough before going in with Watt to collect Jerry for a second round of questioning His first question when they entered the room was a bit of a startler 'Which one is Jerry Owen?' he asked John Watt, as though he'd not already been questioning Jerry for a couple of hours Jerry was floored by this, not knowing whether it was better to go along with Barlow's pretence in front of the other two, or to say straight out 'You know damn well who I am' When he did nearly let slip that he had already been questioned by Barlow, the sharp look of suspicion he got from Gregory brought a worried frown to his face Gregory was a vicious muscle man, they were all aware of what he'd done to Jim Cook He'd do the same, and worse, to Jerry Owen if ever he thought that Jerry was responsible for their being nicked

Back in the interview room, Barlow sat down across from Jerry at the table on which the pilfered goods were still spread Watt took a chair against the wall Barlow nudged a straying tube of lipstick back into place with the others When he'd got the lot arranged to his complete satisfaction, he smiled at Jerry and spoke at last 'I said I'd tell you a story We'll begin now These are part of the story', he finger-tipped the bottles, and the lipsticks, and the tins of meat 'All these are stolen Where they were stolen, a safe was done The story I'm going to tell is about doing safes By a team They weren't so good at it to start with, but in the end they were very good I'd say they were experts They worked very carefully, very neatly, very quietly They were so careful, they had a lad to be their look-out They trusted him But they shouldn't have Because he wasn't keeping watch, he was thieving While they were doing the safes, he was thieving these

John Watt watched, fascinated, as Barlow went through the history of the team, relating each safe-blowing to the pilfering that took place at the same time, producing as further evidence to that on the table, the gloves retrieved by Digby, hammering

as your dad and your girl friend Now . do I bring them in? Show them this lot? Let them see what you were up to? Do I tell them why they are here?

Jerry stared back at him 'You can't do that '

Barlow went to the doorway, beckoned to Digby, and pointed along the corridor 'Bring him in '

John Watt was startled He couldn't do that He couldn't directly expose Owen to a roughing up from his mates not even Charlie Barlow could do that If it ever got out

Digby appeared in the doorway, but it wasn't Matthews with him, it was old Dad Owen Dad, who'd come along to the station, not so much out of concern for Jerry as out of real remorse for what he'd done to Trudy The old man looked at the pilfered goods on the table, recognizing the ones that he had himself provided as evidence

'Are you in trouble, Jerry?' he asked

Jerry turned away, it was Barlow who answered the old man 'What do you think, dad? Even your birthday gloves were nicked ' He turned to Digby 'Bring Gertrude Murphy in ' Digby went. Barlow told Jerry 'Then I bring Matthews Then Gregory . ' Jerry uttered a strangled choking sound Barlow asked him, 'What did you say?'

Jerry looked at him dumbly It seemed that he wanted to say something but couldn't Barlow understood He said quietly to the old man, 'Get out, dad ' Barlow closed the door and stood with his back against it 'You want to tell me something, Jerry? Or do I bring Matthews in?'

'You bastard!' Jerry was up on his feet Watt tensed himself ready in case Jerry should start anything But Barlow showed no concern as he came over to Jerry, stood behind his shoulder, and murmured in his ear 'If you're scared of your friends, I could help you I could get rid of all this pilfered stuff Charge you, together with your mates, just for the safes You'd be in the big time But you'll have to talk '

Jerry's face was grey, he knew only too well what Matthews and Gregory would do to him if ever they found out about the pilfering, he nodded his agreement to Barlow

Barlow shoved his head even closer 'Say it then '

'I'll talk '

It was simply a matter of wrapping it up after that, with Jerry Owen's statement providing sufficient evidence on the series of safe-blowings to incriminate Matthews and Gregory as the other two of the team who were in it from the start, with Wilson as the expert safe-blower recruited later on And the ham-fisted amateur who'd been ditched after the first four clumsy jobs was, of all

people, Dad Owen's older son Mike As Watt had first said, it was a lot of Owens

Barlow grinned at John Watt as he read through the statement 'I knew it all along, John I was right all along Knew I'd only got to stick at it'

'Right in your way, sir,' said John Watt 'But I'm not sure that I wouldn't have been equally right in mine'

Equal Status

(from the television script by Elwyn Jones)

ONE OF THE WYVERN FILES had pasted inside the back cover a copy of the front page of a morning paper John Watt recalled how he'd been sitting at his desk in the Wyvern office reading that paper, when a small explosion reached his ear from the far end of the corridor A few moments earlier, Barlow had galumphed along there in the direction of the washroom The explosion which followed was the raising of his voice in angry protest John Watt allowed himself the shadow of a smile He knew what had angered his boss, he knew too that he had the answers to a number of questions that Barlow had not as yet asked He quietly folded over the front page of the newspaper and sat back in his chair as Barlow stormed into the office.

'John, d'you know what! I just went into the washroom to freshen up . . . turned on the tap . . . and all it did was spit at me'

'Good morning, sir' Watt politely reproached his boss for the unceremonious entry

'You what? Oh . . . good morning' But Barlow continued to glare at him, as though the insolence of the plumbing were his fault 'So what's happened to the water?' he demanded

'I'm not the caretaker,' said Watt, 'but I do read the papers' He unfolded the one in his hand for Barlow to see the headline 'BOMB OUTRAGE' it read, in thick black type

Barlow took the paper and quickly scanned through the paragraphs below It told him of an act of sabotage the previous night upon the main pipeline bringing the water supply for the Wyvern area down from the Welsh hills The details were sparse, but imagination filled in the picture. the dark-clothed figures treading soft-footed through the sleeping darkness towards the gleaming curve of the newly installed water main, the deft hands taping the explosive charge to a riveted joint where it would do the greatest damage, the hastily retreating figures leaving a length of trailing fuse behind them, the sudden flare of the match, and the line of

fire running thinly across the gorse towards the packed joint, where it suddenly erupted in a sheet of flame, the belly-rumbling explosion that made the distant cottagers turn in their beds several miles away, and then the waste of waters pouring from the jagged hole in the pipe over the hillside

'Why, John? Why?' Barlow demanded

'They don't want us to have their water'

Us? Them?

'The Welsh over there, and us over here,' Watt patiently explained, though he knew that Barlow was fully alive to the protests that had been voiced, in English and in Welsh, over the flooding of some of the most tranquil valleys in Wales to provide water-supplies for the increasing thirst of the industrial Midlands and West of England. But protests being of no avail, action had followed, violent action, explosive action, of which the sabotage of the previous night had been the eighth incident in rapid succession. And Watt had heard a whisper, passed on to him by Jim Cook, the Squad's Intelligence Officer, that the Wyvern Regional Crime Squad was going to be asked to assist in finding the terrorists

Barlow stared when Watt told him this 'Thanks,' he said 'I'll bone up on the background'

On his way to the door he hesitated

'John . . . Barlow's heavy early-morning look had already lightened, and a blandly ingratiating smile was beginning to lift the corners of his mouth. John Watt knew what was coming, but he didn't look up. Barlow cleared his throat 'Er . . . John . . . what's your analysis of this little explosion?'

Crafty old fox, thought Watt. He's not done his own homework, so he's hoping that I have. But his response to Barlow was an innocent, 'Me, sir?'

'You're our political expert now,' Barlow was laying it on thick, 'since you sorted out our local red revolutionary at the aircraft works'

'Who turned out to be a very confused little night watchman,' Watt reminded him, 'so afraid of being alone in the dark that he set off those security alarms just so's he could get someone to come running along and keep him company'

'Ay well' Barlow wasn't giving up, 'but our Mr Gilbert was impressed with your political grasp. He told me so himself'

John Watt relented 'All right, sir. What do you want to know?'

This Welsh Nationalism. What's it all about?' Barlow pulled up a chair and sat down 'It's not just about water, is it?'

'It's about patriotism, sir. Local patriotism. Like you and I feel about Lancashire. Finest place in the world.'

'Widnes is,' Barlow said, confining this Lancastrian patriotism to his own home town

'Widnes' and there was just a hint of questioning in Watt's voice as he went on to murmur, 'where no birds sing'

'That's right But so what?' Barlow demanded

'So why shouldn't the Scots be local patriotic as well,' Watt reasoned 'Or the Welsh'

'They can be as local patriotic as I am But I don't go blowing things up to prove it'

'You don't need to,' Watt told him, 'since nobody's stopping you talking the way you want'

'You mean the way I've always spoken?' Barlow's usually subdued Lancastrian tones became unusually prominent 'Why should anyone object? I've not heard objections to the Welsh accent either, though this part of England is busting with it'

'It's not busting with the Welsh language, though,' Watt pointed out

'I should hope not,' said Barlow. And went on to ask slyly, 'How much Welsh do they speak in Wales?'

Watt contrived to make his answer sound casual as he trotted out the hard facts 'About a third of the population of Wales speaks Welsh Only half of that number thinks Welsh'

Barlow was impressed 'Expert,' he murmured

'Not really' Watt's modesty was genuine A very modest man, John Watt thought himself, which was still no reason for hiding lights under bushels. 'As a detective, I try to understand motives'

Barlow was incredulous 'You think you know what makes these bomb fellows tick?'

'I understand a bit of their attitude what they're on about I've got it written down somewhere' Watt's neat little pocket book fell open naturally at the last page written on, which was taken up with only two words printed in large block capitals; strange words to Barlow's eye, being made up of double d's and y's and odd combinations of consonants unpronounceably lacking in vowels 'DDILYSRWYDD CYFARTAL' was what it spelled out, though Watt's careful pronunciation of it was more like 'Thilisrooth cavartal' 'And that,' said Barlow, 'doesn't sound anything like what you've got written down'

'Easy really' Watt explained 'Double d is like th as in "thick". F is always v as in "vanity".'

'And then what the hell does it mean?'

Watt translated '"Equal validity". They want the Welsh language to be equal to the English language'

Barlow was magnanimous 'They can have that, as far as I'm concerned.'

'And as far as Whitehall's concerned, in theory' Watt's voice hardened 'But only in theory I'll give you an example The birth of a child can be registered in Welsh, but only if the local Registrar understands it Otherwise your ardent Welshman has to journey umpteen miles to find a Registrar who does understand Welsh, and then gets fined for registering outside his own district.'

Barlow tut-tutted at this bureaucratic injustice

'So they protest' Watt reached the inevitable conclusion

'By blowing up water mains' There was little doubt of Barlow's abhorrence of such a form of protest

'That's the violent fringe' Watt shot a hard look at Barlow. 'And whether we accept it or not, the fact is that there haven't been many political successes without violence'

Barlow's voice was as caustic as the effluent of the Mersey 'You sound like a public relations man for a bunch of crooks'

Watt explained himself 'It helps to know what we're up against'

'You are against, are you? I was beginning to wonder'

Watt angrily exploded, 'Don't be so . . .' And then hastily caught himself up 'The boss was always the boss, and police discipline had to be observed 'I'm sorry, sir.' Barlow nodded his acceptance of the apology And having both cooled down after their brief spat, their faces were sombre as Watt went on to say, 'Of course, I'm against violence I'm against the destruction of property, public or private And we both know that it doesn't stop there Because this lot will kill somebody one of these days, whether they intend to or not'

They were both silent, aware that beyond the abstractions of politics were the harsh realities of death and destruction which they as police officers were pledged to prevent

Detective Sergeant Hawkins had already gone to the site of the previous night's explosion where he noted, almost with admiration, the skilful way that the amount of explosive and the placing of it had been so exactly judged as to cut a large enough hole for the purpose, without raising so big a bang that every copper in the valley would come racing to the scene to find out what was amiss, noting as well that one unexploded stick of gelignite bore the printed lettering which would enable its source to be traced, and that several detonators, which were also traceable, even after they'd been fired, had been found among the debris

But what might have been a couple of helpful leads turned out to be more of a confusion, for the gelignite had come from a quarry in North Wales, while the detonators were traceable to a colliery in the South

The Special Branch Officer who confirmed this came back with

Hawkins to meet Detective Chief Superintendent Barlow and Detective Chief Inspector Watt, who had now been officially requested to assist in tracing the terrorists. Hawkins went in to prepare his bosses for the arrival of the Special Branch man. 'I've brought Superintendent Evans with me, from the scene,' he told them, discreetly lowering his voice.

Barlow looked up sharply. 'Evans?' he queried. Hawkins nodded. 'You mean a Welshman?' Barlow asked, in total disbelief.

Superintendent Evans, waiting in the corridor, clearly heard this last, though it had been spoken in Barlow's softest tones, for he slipped past Hawkins to say breezily, 'That's right. Set a Taffy to catch a Taffy.' Then, not a whit abashed by Barlow's fish-eyed look, he forced the introductions with a cheerful, 'Good morning, gentlemen! You'll be Mr Barlow.' And when John Watt introduced himself, Evans responded with the same plump-fisted and over-sweaty handshake that Barlow had just been treated to, accompanied with a knowing, 'Heard of you too, Johnnie-Boy!'

God help us, though John Watt. 'Johnnie-Boy! We've got a right one here. And he exchanged a glance of sympathetic wariness with Barlow.

But despite his outward flabbiness, Superintendent Evans of Special Branch was brisk enough and hard enough when it came down to discussing terrorist suspects. 'I've got a list, see,' said Evans, making no attempt whatsoever to produce it for Barlow's information. 'I've got a list of extremists, activists, and belligerents. It's not a long list.'

'Is it accurate?' Barlow slipped in with a malicious twist to his lips.

Evans chose to ignore the malice and answer the question. 'As far as we know, it's accurate, Mr Barlow. As far as we know. Can't say it's complete, of course. But every name on it is active, fighting, even extreme.'

'So what do you do about them?' asked John Watt, not forgetting to say 'sir' to his senior in rank, who had so far failed to give this entitlement to Mr Barlow, who was senior to both of them.

'We watch them, boy,' said Evans. 'We watch our suspects.' And a far-away and somewhat pained look came into his eyes as he added, 'as far as we can.'

Barlow quickly seized on this. 'Which is not very far.'

'How can it be?' Evans's voice was plaintive. 'It's not like watching a bunch of crooks. I've got names written down here'; he tantalizingly tapped his breast pocket where his list of terrorists was presumably kept. 'I've got names of professors, librarians, even lecturers at theological colleges as well as other Reverend gentle-

men These are not criminals These are not thieves These are respectable people, people of *status* '

If Barlow's eyes could have bored through the cloth to read that list they would have done so As it was, he had to content himself with asking 'Were any on that list away from their homes last night?'

Evans hesitated before he answered, and Hawkins quickly came in with, 'Those who live near either the colliery or the quarry where the explosive materials came from have supposedly been cleared '

'Five of them,' explained Evans, 'none of whom were away from their homes '

'How do you know?' demanded Barlow

'I've checked,' Evans told him

Did you ask them? Did you interview them?'

'Not all of them,' Evans was as cautious in his answers as he clearly was in his investigations He went on to defend this caution, 'We've got to watch our step There's one gentleman, very learned he is I only have to be wrong about questioning him once more, and he'll have my head on the block '

Watt was thoughtful 'They can't all be so highly educated '

'Indeed no,' Evans agreed 'Some of them are only students '

Barlow had picked up John Watt's line of thought 'Students whose status is not so great '

'That is so '

Barlow threw a significant glance at Evans's breast pocket 'How many?'

'About seven '

'And have *they* been interviewed in connection with last night's explosion?'

Evans's reply was guardedly non-committal 'I can't guarantee that they all have '

Barlow and Watt were both sitting upright now, thinking together, working together, and though it was Barlow who kept throwing the questions, it was as though the two of them were speaking with one voice

'Could you find us two youngish suspects who haven't yet been questioned over last night? Preferably linked in some way to either of the two places where the explosives came from, the quarry or the mine '

'Does it matter which?'

'No I just need an excuse to call on them A "reason to believe" if you like '

Evans's hand crept to his breast pocket and slowly brought forth several closely spaced pages of typescript Watt's eyebrows lifted as he exchanged a look with Barlow Were there really so many

Welshmen suspected of terrorism? But Evans had little difficulty in picking out of that number the one who fitted the bill for Barlow's devious purpose 'If you have in mind, sir, what I think you have in mind, sir, I'd suggest young Daniel Owen'

John Watt wondered at the sudden sly rash of 'sirs', and whether it had anything to do with Evans's astonishing alacrity in producing this one name He'd hardly looked at his list to find it Hawkins, who was more fully briefed on the morning's investigations, knew the reason why 'Daniel Owen is the one real lead, sir'

Evans explained, 'Daniel Owen has a car And whoever did last night's little job would need a car since the place is miles from nowhere'

'And a car was seen ?'

'By a sergeant who noted a grey Morris 1100 in the early hours of the morning, about three miles from the scene of the explosion He had no reason to pay it special attention, there was no road check on at the time, and if he did hear the bang, well it was just another noise But he's a careful type, so any traffic he sees tootling around at four-thirty a m he takes a note of And the number he noted is this'

Evans placed on the desk a slip of paper with a car number written on it in thick black pencil Watt stared at it, it was too good to be true

'That number can be traced to Daniel Owen?'

'Not quite,' said Evans 'Daniel Owen does have a grey Morris 1100 But its number is this'

He produced another slip of paper with a typewritten number which he placed above the pencilled one There was a one figure difference between the two numbers

'The Sergeant could have made a mistake,' said Barlow, jabbing at the pencilled registration Evans did not disagree with this possibility

'Has the Sergeant's report been checked?' Watt demanded 'Not with Daniel Owen,' Evans told him And then added, choosing his words slowly and carefully, 'I was saving him for you'

Barlow looked up in surprise 'Why?'

'He's young, tough, and a bit wild,' Evans told him

'Are you frightened of him?' Barlow nearly said But though he bit the words off half way, Evans caught at his meaning 'No, Mr Barlow, sir,' he answered, with no apparent rancour at the imputation 'I'm not frightened of him But neither is he frightened of me He knows me too well He's seen me too often'

Barlow looked at Watt thoughtfully. 'But he's not seen either of us'

Evans ignored the inclusion of Watt, and said straight out to Barlow, 'He's certainly never seen *you*'

Barlow sat back heavily in his chair 'And you want me to frighten him?'

'Certainly not,' Evans said hastily. And then with a bland deviousness that was near the equal of Barlow's he carefully explained, 'It's just that well, I'd feel there were better hopes of a satisfactory outcome if someone of your status saw him.'

Watt nodded his head in understanding 'Sefyllfa,' he said slowly. Only it sounded like 'sevlva'. Barlow raised an astonished eyebrow 'Means 'status', ' Watt explained to him. And Evans nodded admiringly 'They told me you were conscientious, Johnnie. You've been learning Welsh.'

'Just a word or two,' said Watt modestly.

'That's one of the important words,' said Evans.

And Sergeant Hawkins, whose own lack of status pressed heavily upon him, uttered his sombre agreement.

Barlow, impatient of this mood of solemnity, broke their triple reverie 'Ay. Where does this Daniel Owen live?'

Evans wrote the address on the slip of paper with the type-written car number upon it, and handed it to Barlow 'You remember the colliery where the detonators came from it's quite near there.'

The Crime Squad trio drove to the Welsh mining valley which was the home of Daniel Owen. When they came in sight of the pit-head that stood tall sentinel above the village they went separate ways, Watt going off alone to follow up a lead that Evans had provided on one of Owen's close acquaintances, while Barlow and Hawkins went straight to the terraced street where the young man lived. They parked the car away from the house and walked the last few hundred yards, but for all their efforts to obscure their arrival their brisk and confident march along the street was the tread of strangers in a place where men walked slowly to pass the time of day. Barlow slowed his pace to let Hawkins go ahead and beat a rat-tat on the gleaming knocker of number twenty-seven. For a long moment there was neither sound nor movement from inside the house. Barlow patiently shifted his weight from one foot to another, all his life he was used to waiting on doorsteps.

At last, the door opened slowly, reluctantly. The woman who stood with her hand upon the latch was all stillness, but it was the stillness of resignation rather than repose. In answer to Hawkins's inquiries she admitted nothing more than that she was the mother of Daniel Owen, that her son was in, and—after having closed the door on Barlow and Hawkins for a further few minutes—that her son did not wish to speak to them. Hawkins put his foot in the door before she could close it again 'We don't want a fuss, Mrs Owen, do we?'

'Why not, then?' she answered with spirit 'Our neighbours are used to the police coming here Don't even bother to look out of the windows any more Used to it, they are'

Barlow, who saw through this show of unconcern, asked her directly, 'Are *you?* used to it?' And Mrs Owen's bravado blew away like thistledown 'No,' she admitted, and there was more sorrow in the single word than in a valley of tears Barlow was gentle with her 'Don't make it harder for yourself Let us in, or send Daniel out We need a word with him—for his own good' And in a harder voice, pitched up for the benefit of the listener within, he said to Hawkins, 'Imagine a man of twenty-two sheltering behind his mother's apron'

This clearly upset Mrs Owen's pride, maternal and domestic, and the flash of spirit shone through again as she answered, 'Why not then? Though I'm sorry about the apron' She removed it with neat dignity, already folding and smoothing it as she looked up at Barlow and told him, 'There's no welcome for you in this house I am *not* asking you in'

She went back into the house leaving the front door open Hawkins would have slipped in after, but Barlow was not content with this minor victory 'Easy now,' he said, holding back Hawkins's impatience He was playing a bigger fish

The young man who did come to the door, after keeping them waiting a while longer, had his mother's composure but there was no resignation in it He answered Hawkins's questions politely enough, except that the answers were in Welsh, it was only the nod of the head that indicated his acknowledgement of being the Daniel Owen they were seeking, and the gesture of invitation that showed his consent to their entering the house

Barlow and Hawkins followed him down the passage and into the parlour, the neat domestic appearance of which was overlaid by the litter of books stacked in heaps everywhere Barlow picked one up, the title on the cover was in that same strange consonantal mixture of d's and w's and l's that Watt had lectured him on the same morning; and when he placed it back upon the pile that stood shoulder high, he saw that they too were all Welsh Barlow regarded them with astonishment, he'd no idea that there were so many different Welsh-language books Well, if the lad wanted to do all his reading in that strange lingo, it was his look-out, but he had no right to go on answering Hawkins's questions in Welsh At best, it was lack of courtesy, at worst, it was deliberate obstruction of the police in the execution of their duty He warned the young man of this, making the statement quietly and in reasonable tones If there was going to be any hot blood raised by this breakdown in communication, it would come from the young man's side, not from his

Daniel Owen responded to Barlow's warning with the belligerent utterance of two Welsh words which Barlow immediately recognized from his discussion with Watt the same morning Dilis-something-or-other 'You mean Equal Validity,' Barlow snapped back at him. And Owen was so surprised at the Englishman's recognition of the slogan that he unconsciously answered in English, 'That's right.'

Barlow's lips twitched in a half smile, first round to him. Owen still insisted, though, 'I don't do myself justice in English. I prefer to answer your questions in my own language.'

Barlow shrugged at this 'Go ahead.' And added with a hint of sarcasm that diminished the young man's heroic stance, 'After which, you can translate your own reply. Take a little longer, but I'm in no rush.'

Owen's response was an angry sputter of Welsh, the tone of which made the meaning clear without any need for translation. Barlow turned an amused look to Hawkins. 'Funny how frightened men always get nasty.'

Owen's need to deny the accusation of cowardice was strong enough to make him lapse into English for a second time. But in reply to the questions that Barlow then put to him, concerning his whereabouts the previous night, and the present location of his car, Owen once again retreated into Welsh. Barlow had had enough. With a word of warning to the young man first, he and Hawkins closed on him, ready to take him into custody, by force if necessary.

The parlour door opened quietly, so quietly that Barlow knew that Mrs Owen must have been standing outside clutching the handle waiting for the necessary moment to intervene.

'You've asked the boy where he was last night,' she said to Barlow. 'He's told you, if you had the wit to understand. He was in his bed upstairs.'

'How d'you know?' Hawkins demanded.

'I heard him go to bed,' Mrs Owen told them. 'I didn't hear him get up again until the morning.'

Hawkins dismissed this as an alibi, Daniel Owen might have slipped out while Mrs Owen was asleep. She denied the possibility. 'Mr Detective,' she addressed him with firm dignity, 'I would have heard. I barely sleep, you see. Not at night. Not any more.'

Barlow's head came up. He had the whiff of a trail that he knew he could pursue with success. And he would be gentle, ever so gentle in pursuing it. 'Why don't you sleep, Mrs Owen?' he asked.

'Because I'm worried sick.' Daniel tried to dam the overflowing of his mother's anxieties, but there was no holding them back. 'I'm afraid for him. In and out at all hours. People coming and going at all hours. The police coming at all hours.'

'And last night?' Barlow gently led her on

'Nothing last night He was in his bed'

Barlow knew that she was speaking the truth, and he meant it when he said to her, 'I'm glad' Turning to Daniel with studied politeness he asked him to write down the Welsh equivalent phrase for 'I was in my bed' in the notebook which Hawkins held open for him 'I've a feeling I'll be hearing that phrase again,' he explained 'And I'd like to be able to recognize it' Daniel smiled as he wrote it down They certainly would be hearing it again and again and again He scarcely noticed what Barlow was saying to his mother, quietly and with great sympathy

'I had a sergeant once, Mrs Owen One of the old school Tough but very human He used to say that he was really sorry for only one thing "I'm sorry," he used to say, "for all the thieves' mothers in the world"' Barlow's voice was equally sorrowful as he went on, 'I'm beginning to be sorry for the mothers of agitators You bring them into the world, look after them, educate them and that's a struggle for some folk—widows, for instance, as I understand you are, Mrs Owen'

Daniel rudely interrupted Barlow's sob story 'You'll bring tears to my eyes'

'Look at your mother's' Barlow grated at him Mrs Owen was sobbing quietly, making no attempt to wipe away the tears

Hawkins took the opportunity of hammering at the agonized young man 'Where's your car, Mr Owen?' Before Daniel could half utter his expectedly incomprehensible Welsh reply, Mrs Owen had answered for him, 'He gave permission to some friends to borrow it'

'I was afraid of that,' said Barlow

'Which friends?' Hawkins asked

Daniel's terse outburst in Welsh was as good as a refusal to answer Barlow guessed that Mrs Owen knew who had borrowed the car Well, she was a sensible woman It should be possible to persuade her to cough up for her son's own good 'Mrs Owen' his tone was reasonable 'last night a water main was damaged by explosives You tell me that Daniel was in his bed at the time and I believe you But a car was seen not far from where the explosion took place of exactly the same colour and make as your son's, and with nearly the same licence number'

She seized upon this loophole in the case against Daniel 'Only nearly the same'

Barlow nodded 'You see, I'm being straight with you, Mrs Owen I'm admitting the possibility that it was another car altogether' Mrs Owen breathed her relief which Barlow gave her no time to enjoy 'It's also possible,' he pointed out, 'that it *was* your son's car, and the officer who saw it simply made a mistake, a

very slight mistake, in noting the number. So we'd like to check on wherever Daniel's car is now.'

Still Mrs Owen hesitated to tell him, Barlow drove home the final warning that would play upon her fears, and though his voice was gentle, his words conjured up a picture of bloody violence. 'Last night, Mrs Owen, four and a half ounces of gelignite were used to blow that main. Nearly enough to blow up this house and half the street with it.' Mrs Owen uttered a gasp of horror, Barlow pressed on, 'There's more to it than that, and I'll be frank in telling you. Last night's job was an expert one. Is your son an expert in explosives?'

Mrs Owen's reply was in Welsh, but her face agonizingly said 'no'.

'I was afraid of that, too,' said Barlow. 'You see, these amateurs get hold of explosives, they don't know how to look after them, they keep them for months, maybe long after they've become dangerous to handle, and what's the result? I'll tell you, Mrs Owen. One of these days, or one of these nights, these bright boys are going to blow *themselves* up.' And as he saw the shocked look come upon her Barlow quickly slipped in, 'Who borrowed Daniel's car?'

'David James.' Mrs Owen's reply was that of an automaton, 'Lives over in Ebenezer Street. Number thirty-one.' Daniel's reproachful, 'Oh mam!' was near to despair.

Barlow and Hawkins exchanged a quick look. Chief Inspector Watt, acting on information from Evans, Special Branch, was even then making inquiries about the man James, over in the vicinity of Ebenezer Street. 'I'll get the message to Mr Watt, sir,' said Hawkins. 'He'll need to know about the car when he talks to James.'

John Watt could see that David James was pleased with the way the interview was shaping. He'd been nervous at first, frightened of the contained man in the grey overcoat who didn't smile very much, though he didn't shout or bluster either. In fact, for a police officer, and an English one at that, Detective Chief Inspector Watt seemed to be very sympathetic—very understanding, and even approving of the different forms of civil action taken by the Welsh Nationalists to further their cause. John Watt had even expressed his willingness to sign any petition in support of maintaining the Welsh culture, the Welsh institutions, or the Welsh language, as long as it stopped short of approval of any kind of violent protest. But when John Watt tackled the young man on his own attitude towards violence, there was a hesitation in the lad's reply which Watt pigeon-holed for future reference.

In the meantime, and having persuaded the lad that no one was going to subject him to third degree questioning, Watt sought

some answer on questions of fact 'Where were you last night?' he asked

In bed,' David told him

'Where?'

'Here, of course'

'Why "of course"?' Watt didn't even try to conceal his astonishment 'At your age I quite often slept away from home'

David James nodded, 'So do I' But he said it so solemnly that Watt wondered if the lad had caught his meaning

'So you slept at home last night' Watt pressed the point, 'Can you prove it?'

'How?'

'How the hell should I know!' Watt was beginning to get irritated with David James Wet, that's what he was Couldn't even provide his own alibi Did he want Detective Chief Inspector Watt to provide one for him? 'You didn't sneak some little Welsh sweetheart into your bedroom?' he suggested

David was shocked at the idea, which Watt didn't think so very implausible The lad wasn't at all bad looking, and he'd already said that his parents were away on holiday, which would have made it possible, even easy, to sneak in a girl friend But if he said he hadn't, well he hadn't In which case, nobody could possibly have seen him in bed, which made it difficult—as Watt explained to the lad—for anyone to believe his story, managing to convey that he, John Watt, would like to believe it, if only young David could produce a scrap of substantiation 'What time did you go to bed?' he asked, with an underlying air of saying 'let's try to tackle your alibi that way'

David had a ready answer 'About eleven,' he said promptly 'Just after the Welsh telly news'

Watt shook his head at this, and his tone was that of regret rather than disbelief 'That reply of yours, David it was just a bit too pat Do you follow me?' And he leaned forward as though to share a confidence 'It's like the too clever thief who says "I was watching Panorama at the time, which was about the American Presidential Election"'

'It would be,' said David

Watt nodded his agreement, 'Just so' And while the lad was still smirking at this shared insight, Watt shot the next question at him 'Where is Daniel Owen's car? Now, think before you answer, since you were the one who borrowed it'

David's jaw dropped open, and it wasn't all that firm when it was closed, thought Watt He was glad that he had been given the information about the borrowed car before he came in to talk to David James, it was going to be the clincher in cracking the lad who was, God knew, close enough to cracking already 'It is true,

isn't it, that you borrowed the car,' demanded Watt 'Or are you going to call your friend, Daniel Owen, a liar?'

David stared in disbelief 'Did he tell you?'

John Watt himself never told a lie when he could avoid it. 'Let's say he didn't deny that you've got the car,' was his careful reply 'Which Daniel could have done. Except that he's got his own skin to save.'

There was a fierceness about David's refusal to believe this imputation of his friend's disloyalty which Watt shoved in the same mental pigeon-hole as his earlier thoughts about the lad. But there was the matter of the borrowed car to clear up first. 'Where is it?' he demanded. And went on to threaten the lad with arrest if he refused to answer, a threat which he had every intention and every right of carrying out.

David clearly had no stomach for taking his resistance that far. 'The car's in the garage,' he told Watt. 'Our garage. My dad's garage.'

'What's it doing there?'

David shrugged. 'Better than out in the street.'

'It's going to be looked at,' said Watt. 'A touch of the old forensics. Did you use it last night? Or anybody else?'

'I didn't. Nor did anyone else to the best of my knowledge.'

Watt shook his head. 'That's another tricky answer. Never mind. When did you borrow it?'

'Two days ago.'

'Why did you borrow it?'

'To go for a run.'

'Did you go?'

'No.'

Watt's ear had picked out a note of envy in the lad's last replies. 'You've no car of your own?' he asked casually.

'No.'

'Do you want one?'

'Of course.'

Watt held the lad's gaze, like a snake fixing a rabbit. 'You could get a car of your own, you know.' He kept talking, spelling it out slowly, 'By keeping your eyes open. And opening your mouth a bit. In a good cause.'

David's gaping mouth snapped shut. 'I would never betray. . . ' he began, without saying just what it was that he held so sacred.

'Just consider who you'd be helping,' Watt pointed out. 'You lot are doing all right now. Every time you make a legal protest, you're winning. But if you mean to go beyond that, then watch it.'

'We're not afraid,' said David James. But his voice was not as firm as he intended it to be.

Watt's face was sombre as he told the lad, 'I am afraid, David,

Not of you, but for you Somebody's already been hurt by these bomb protests, you know that One of these days, someone might even be killed ' Watt caught the shade of a tremor across the lad's face, and he pressed home the point 'You're like me, David You get frightened When you see a stick of gelignite, you want to run I know that I do I'm against gelignite '

'So am I,' David said

'Then make your own protest,' Watt told him, ' against explosives ' Watt took a pencil from his pocket, and while the lad watched him, he wrote a number in the margin of a newspaper that lay on the table It was the number of the private telephone line at the Wyvern Crime Squad office, the line reserved for police informants 'I'm glad to have met you, Dafydd,' he said, giving the name its Welsh pronunciation 'Any time you want to talk to me, just call that number You could be doing everybody a favour. Your cause, your country ' Hat in hand, Watt was already at the doorway, he turned to say as an afterthought, 'And you'd be doing a favour for yourself '

'David James didn't do it '

'And Daniel Owen didn't do it '

The three Crime Squad officers had met up again with Superintendent Evans of Special Branch to compare notes on their investigations of the two young men Barlow was convinced that Mrs Owen was telling the truth in claiming that her son was in bed at the time of the blowing up of the water main; while Watt's instinct told him that the other lad hadn't the guts to tell a straight-out lie about it Moreover, the car seen on the road nearby the car that looked like Daniel Owen's, was the same colour as Daniel Owen's, and had nearly the same registration number as Daniel Owen's, turned out to be a different car entirely, owned by someone else in the locality with a perfectly good reason for being out and about at four-thirty in the morning

Barlow had a feeling though, that there was some purpose behind one of the lads loaning his car to the other.

'They were going to do something,' John Watt agreed 'But I don't think that David James will now '

Superintendent Evans looked at the quiet self-contained man with a new respect 'Scared him off, did you?' he suggested

'A bit ' Watt's face was expressionless as he added, 'I said we'd be interested in buying him off too '

Barlow and Evans responded with equal casualness to the possibility, sorting out in a moment that neither of them were likely to make a suitably soft impression on the young man, leaving it to Detective Sergeant Hawkins to follow up John Watt's first sounding out. Watt noticed that Harry Hawkins' usually prognathous

jaw jutted out even further as his senior officers discussed the method of approach. What's biting our Harry? John Watt wondered. It wouldn't be the first time he'd done a deal with an informant.

'How much are we going to offer?' John Watt raised the question as a practical issue, which Barlow followed up with an even more loaded question, directed straight at Superintendent Evans of Special Branch. 'Whose funds will it come from?'

'There'd be no trouble about who paid, sir,' Evans assured him. 'We would.' And then added hastily, lest Crime Squad should let their generosity run away with Special Branch's funds, 'Keep it around fifty quid for the first time anyway.'

While Barlow and Evans went off to continue their higher level deliberations—over a shared bottle of whisky, Watt suspected—Hawkins stayed to splutter up his bubbling dissatisfaction to John Watt. 'What a job you've landed me this time, sir!' Trapping a kid into betraying his mates.'

'It's distasteful,' John Watt agreed. But to Hawkins's impertinent 'You can say that again!' he snapped back. 'And you can keep a civil tongue in your head.' Cheeky young devil. And him only a Detective Sergeant, speaking like that to a Detective Chief Inspector. Still, the young 'uns had to learn, and some of the lessons weren't easy. Like this one of betrayal. It was distasteful, even creepy. But as he explained patiently, if somewhat wearily, to Harry Hawkins, 'We shall never crack this bombing set-up without an informant. Not in a month of Sundays. But over in Ebenezer Street there is a potential informant. So go and recruit him. And discover there's more to police work than shouting.'

Harry Hawkins needed a reason for calling at Ebenezer Street. You don't knock at a man's door and offer to buy his conscience straight out. So he presented himself to David James as a forensics expert, come to inspect the car borrowed from Daniel Owen, and confirm that it had not been driven about in the vicinity of the sabotaged water main within the previous twenty-four hours. James opened up the garage and stood looking on while Hawkins scraped bits of earth from various parts of the car's chassis and put them into labelled envelopes in what he trusted was a suitably scientific sort of way. And while he worked, he talked, letting the conversation hover, like a butterfly around a buddleia bush, round and about the subject of selling information. Soon Hawkins forgot his scruples and lost himself in the enjoyment of playing his 'snout' like a fish on the end of a line, baiting the hook with talk of sports cars and the kind that young David James wished he could afford to buy, casting it on the water with practical advice on how David could explain a sudden rush of wealth as a win on a Premium

Bond, making a strike with a precise demand for information on where and when the next sabotage incident was likely to take place, giving the lad his head on a loose line while his conscience kept him dashing to and fro, then slowly reeling him in closer . . . closer . . . ready to fall into the net It wasn't so much different from playing a criminal snout, except that the cost of ideological betrayal seemed to be higher 'Fifty pounds . . . ' Hawkins dropped into the conversation, going to the limit that he'd been authorized to offer, to which David James responded with a phrase in Welsh and a wry twist of his mouth

'What are you on about?' asked Hawkins And wasn't surprised when James translated the phrase as 'Thirty pieces of silver' It was just the sort of melodramatic attitudinizing that had got these crackpots up to whatever antics they'd been dallying with

'You were going to do something, weren't you?' Hawkins put to him

'He was'

'Daniel Owen?'

'Yes'

'But not you?'

James shook his head Hawkins casually asked, 'What were you going to do?' When James tried to hedge by pleading uncertainty of the plans, Hawkins brutally told him, 'You're no good to us then'

David James's sallow face took on an even more waxen tinge It was the crunch, he either had to talk to Hawkins now, tell all he knew, or forget about whatever hungers were driving him on to betraying his friends He still seemed to be dithering as he stated obscurely, 'His mother thinks I've got the car'

'She was right'

'He wasn't really keeping it a secret then,' James pointed out 'Even you know I've got it'

Hawkins was puzzled What was this leading to? James babbled on, 'Daniel Owen . . . he's not stupid He wants me to drive the car about . . . tonight'

Hawkins's back went rigid 'Tonight! Christ, was it going to be as soon as that? Outwardly though, he was as casual as ever, as he prompted the lad, 'Just drive it about?'

James explained, 'He reckons you'll follow the car Keep an eye on it anyway And you'll see nothing For I shan't be doing anything'

'But somebody else will?'

'Yes'

'Daniel Owen?'

James nodded

'What will he be doing?'

'I'm not sure'

Hawkins was already translating promises into hard cash, counting out five one-pound notes from his wallet as he told the lad, 'We could test your idea. If there's anything in it, we'd pay just for the idea. Meantime, this is on account.' He held out the cash, before James could even crook his fingers to take it, Hawkins drew it back, slowly, just enough to leave the fluttering notes within reach of a longer grasp, if David James would only stretch out his hand. 'There's more for you, now,' Hawkins promised, 'if you tell more now.'

James was really caught. The plan, of which he clearly knew every detail, spilled forth from his lips. 'Daniel's coming here at seven. We drive around a bit. Perhaps have a drink or a bit of supper somewhere. I drop him back home by nine.'

'And then we follow you.'

James nodded. 'He reckons you'll do that as long as I'm driving his car.'

'While he slips out on foot.'

'Out of the back of his house. He's counting on your not watching it back *and* front.' He faltered in the telling of the plan. Hawkins added five more one pound notes to the five already in his hand.

'Keep on talking.'

James drew a deep breath. 'He'll be meeting two others going by bus to the rendezvous 9.23 from the bus station.'

'Where to?' Hawkins demanded.

'Hir Deitho.'

He could just as well have said Llanfair whatever it was, for all that meant to Harry Hawkins. 'What's at this place?'

'Hir Deitho? It's where there's a water main.'

Another one, thought Hawkins, like last night's. These jokers are not kidding. 'Does the bus go all the way there?' he questioned. And when James retreated into a sideways glance, he demanded, 'Come on! Come on!'

'He'll be getting off two stops before the Hir Deitho terminal.' The words were tumbling out now in his eagerness to void the last bitter-tasting residue, '... there'll be a car waiting to pick him up. From then on I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.'

Hawkins was already adding another five to the ten one-pound notes in his hand, having satisfied himself that he'd got from the lad all that he had to tell, when a sudden creak of the garage door made him turn and brought a gasp of alarm from David James. It was Watt, with a word of caution for James. 'Your voice pitches up, you know. I heard some of that. Not that I'm saying it to frighten you. Just speaking the truth as I hope you were.'

'I was,' James assured him.

Watt nodded 'In which case you'll be driving Daniel Owen about for two hours this evening before you go your separate ways. Two hours of just you and your friend together, with him not knowing about this chat, and you not letting on. Do you think you can keep it up?'

'Oh yes.' There was a half smile on David James's face, and all the half hints that Watt had previously pigeon-holed suddenly fell into place as he said, 'You see, I don't very much like Daniel Owen.'

The trailing operation that evening was carefully set up, even to the extent of laying on a rather too conspicuous car-full of plain clothes men to continue following David James when he drove away, alone, from Daniel Owen's front door. A more discreet observer checked Daniel into his own house and out of it again—after a brief but far from reassuring word with Mrs Owen—by the back door.

Meanwhile John Watt was making his way to the bus station to catch the 9.23 bus to Hir Deitho. A quiet man in a grey overcoat who looked as though he might be an insurance collector out on an evening round as he boarded the bus a few seconds after Daniel Owen and settled himself a couple of seats in front of the lad. The bus whined its way along the quiet roads, up and down the sides of the valley, through the villages already half slumbering, climbing towards the crouching hill top, and in its wake a small car meandered gently, sometimes close enough for the driver to read the destination board 'HIR DEITHO', but more often so far back that the bus was no more than a faint glow around a bend of the valley road. Hawkins's hands on the wheel of the car were relaxed, now that his earlier qualms were submerged in the need for action. This was something he understood, the hard-grinding, patient, solitary existence that was so much a part of Crime Squad life, watching, waiting for the crime to take place or at least be attempted, being almost disappointed when it didn't happen, which was more often than not, but getting that adrenalin kick of satisfaction on the rare occasions when one of the 'big ones' was caught and put inside for a stretch that would confound his knavish tricks for a long while to come. These bombers now, true enough, they weren't criminals, but a quantity of 'gelly' going off was a nasty business, no matter who it was that was doing it or for what reason. Bombing was dangerous, people got killed.

Daniel Owen didn't look like a killer as he got off the bus at a deserted wayside stop and turned about to head back the way he'd just come. John Watt saw him go, watching the lad's reflection in the side window as the bus started up again to carry him on to the next stop. A pleasant young man who looked as though he

cared, if he'd only channel his caring in a more sensible direction and the others mixed up with him in the whole silly business

The two young men in the car that picked up Daniel Owen a few moments after he got off the bus were very much like him, young, alert, eager-looking Hawkins saw the pick-up take place and nodded his satisfaction, so far the James boy's information had proved accurate, if they stopped the car now they'd likely find the gelly on board and be able to take the three lads on a charge of unlawful possession of explosives But they needed more, they needed evidence of intention, which meant letting them get a bit closer to the water main before dropping on them Anyway, picking the right moment was something for Mr Watt to decide

Watt got off the bus at the stop after the one where Daniel Owen had alighted and walked briskly along the road like a man with somewhere to get to and no time to be lost in getting there The car with the three young men in it passed him, and if Daniel Owen did feel a flash of alarm at once again seeing his fellow passenger on the bus, his fears must have been allayed by the rear view sighting of the grey-coated man being rapidly left behind as their car turned the corner A moment after their tail-lights disappeared, Hawkins's car stopped to pick up Watt and swiftly followed at their heels

The two cars were now approaching the village at the HIR DEITHO bus terminal, above which was the water main now under threat from the saboteurs Two side roads led up towards the water main The car containing the three young Welsh lads and perhaps the sticks of gelignite slowed down as it neared the first of these side roads Hawkins automatically speeded up and passed it, follow-the-leader was a dead give-away in the trailing game, better to go past and then turn round and come back again No fear of losing the quarry with other police cars lying tucked away in the vicinity, waiting for the radio call that would bring them roaring up to their rendezvous with the bombers

Nervous and edgy were these three bombers as their car stopped within sniffing distance of the water pipe-line Daniel Owen got out and took from the back seat a bundle that looked like a number of dirty greasy candles bound round with black insulating tape Sweaty they were in his hands, and sweaty was he himself, feeling the trickles soak his skin and then turn icy cool in the night air The car howled and moaned as it made a three-point turn on the rough lane, manoeuvring to face the way it came from for a quick get-away The wheels spun on a patch of loose earth as the driver wrenched at the steering wheel in the darkness that was suddenly, blazingly lit up by the headlight flare of two cars approaching at speed, two police cars, the one a patrol car with two uniformed men, the other the small saloon with Hawkins and

Watt; all four police officers already out and running across to where the two young men still sat in their car, held there by the paralysing headlight glare. But the third man, Daniel Owen, already out of the car and on his feet, with desperation to drive his heels, sprang for the covering darkness and fled like a fox across the hillside. Over the gorse he sped, with Watt and Hawkins close behind him. But it was his country not theirs, and gradually the distance between them lengthened until he was only a remote figure sharply outlined on the hill crest, with what looked like a bundle of sticks clutched in his hand, a figure that stumbled and nearly fell, pitching the bundle sharply to the ground at his feet.

John Watt saw it go, and automatically shielded his face with his arm, Hawkins was caught by the searing flash that blinded him for a moment and made his heart start a sudden thumping. When he'd blinked his vision back again, he saw that on the hill crest nothing stirred. Next to him, John Watt shuffled his feet and coughed. There was no need of going to look for a body; with that much of an explosion there'd only be bits left. The night air was cold and there was a bitter taste in it, of exploded gelignite and drifting dust, of an investigation successfully carried out and a file closed, of a mother's heart broken and a young man's life thrown away.

See the Rabbit

(from the television script by Alan Plater)

IT WASN'T ALL hard-case criminals and safeguarding the nation's security in Crime Squad days. Sometimes the dossiers that came to Barlow and Watt for their attention dealt with minor incidents that happened so often as to become a major nuisance. When these got too much for the local forces to handle, or when they were spread over more than one force area, the Chief Constable or Chief Constables concerned shared the burden with the Regional Crime Squad.

John Watt looked through one such dossier that had first come his way with the usual 'keep a look out for' request attached to it signed by one Chief Constable Nicholson. From Nicholson, who was boss of the local force, it had come to Assistant Chief Constable Austin. If you don't mind. Gilbert, boss of the Regional Crime Squad, who had in his turn passed it on to Detective Chief Superintendent Barlow. Barlow had dropped it on the desk of Detective Chief Inspector Watt with a 'leave this to you, John'. 'Twas ever thus.

Watt remembered his exasperation and disgust at reading the dossier through. It was just bad enough to be worrying, but not so bad as to justify more than the straightforward 'keep a look out for' that Nicholson had requested. He endorsed the request with his own initials and an appended 'best way you can' and thrust it in the out tray for the attention of Detective Sergeant Hawkins.

In the adjacent general office, Hawkins sorted the contents of the overflowing out tray for the attention of Policewoman Detective Sergeant Barbara Allin and Detective Constable Ben Box. There were several urgent items requiring more immediate attention before dealing with the dossier. He selected one 'Security check needed at Dawson's, the jewellers'. He looked across at his silent colleagues. 'Don't both rush at once.'

'What's the hurry?' asked Barbara Allin.

'They had a nasty fright last month.'

'Should have got over it by now. How's your little girl, Ben?'

Box, who was taken unawares, either by the nature of the question itself or by the change of subject, looked blank for a moment. 'Some fathers . . . !' said Barbara Allin. 'You forgotten already, Ben? your Janet phoning yesterday afternoon? asking you to come home early? Something the matter with your little girl, wasn't it? I thought Janet was quite worried.' She shot a look at her four-square, solid-as-a-rock colleague. 'I thought you were quite worried too.'

'You know what it is,' Ben Box told her, ' routine kids' wotsits. She's fine now, thanks.'

'Good.'

'When you two Doctor Spocks have finished . . .', Hawkins brought them back to the subject of crime and crime prevention. 'Who's going to do the security check at Dawson's?'

Sergeant Allin bent her head over the Daily Crime Report she'd been studying. 'What have you got on, Barbara?' Hawkins asked her.

'About the usual,' she murmured, 'One skirt, one blouse, one pair of . . .'. Hawkins tapped his pencil on the desk.

'Sorry Harry'. She pointed to a couple of items on the Crime Report. 'Some stolen cameras doing the rounds. Somebody else knocking off E-Type Jaguars.'

'That sounds like a good cause,' Box commented.

'Could be a cause that we should be taking an interest in.'

Hawkins agreed. 'Like setting up a fast getaway for a hold-up job? You could be right, Barbara. Worth taking a further look at anyway.' Barbara Allin nodded.

'Does that mean that I get palmed off with Dawson's?' asked Box.

'Good of you to volunteer, Ben' Hawkins handed him the formal request 'Just take a quick look at their locks doors, windows make a note of what it ought to be You can be back here within the hour'

'If I don't run into any of our ten most wanted men' Box was already slipping on the big, loose, square-shouldered coat that so often prompted his wise-cracking colleagues to murmur Box by name and Box by looks 'Who are today's top ten?' he asked casually

Hawkins flipped the pages of the dossier that had come all the way through from Chief Constable Nicholson to land on his desk 'I wouldn't exactly say that this fellow was favourite with me Could well do with less of his sort about'

'Another one of those?' asked Allin

Hawkins read out a few extracts from the summary on the top page of the dossier 'Drives around in a green Cortina saloon with a doll hanging in the back window Hangs about playgrounds and parks Asks the kids if they want to see some rabbits'

'Makes a change from offering them sweeties,' Barbara Allin commented

'May I see that?' Box held out his hand for the dossier

'Dawson's' Hawkins reminded him But he skimmed the dossier across the desk where Box and Allin could both read it 'Just making a nuisance of himself,' said Allin 'Nothing too serious'

'so far,' Box added And firmly buttoned his coat, ready to go 'I'll be off now All outstanding crimes duly noted

'If you need any help, Ben

'I don't think so, Sergeant Hawkins. I think I can manage'

'That's just as well Because you weren't going to get any Be off, then!'

Box nodded and went

Hawkins looked across at Barbara Allin 'I wonder what it does take to shake our Ben'

John Watt was shaken within the next twenty-four hours, as was every other member of the Regional Crime Squad It started when a first disquieting report came through, arising out of an assault on a Mr Thomas Assaults were usually the concern of the local force wherever the incident took place; it was only the puzzling ones were ever referred to the Crime Squad The assault on Mr Thomas was seemingly inexplicable Even stranger was the way in which it came to the notice of the police Mr Thomas did not complain, even though he was brought into hospital badly beaten up and acutely distressed, all that he wanted was to be

left alone, nursing his bruises. It was his wife who asked the police to investigate the assault upon her husband.

Mr Thomas's first telling of how it happened made no sense. Two men had stopped him in the local park, invited him to go with them for a ride in a car, taken him to a nearby common, and there savagely beaten him up and left him, two men who were complete strangers and who, as far as he knew, had no motive for the attack. That was what he told his wife, his own doctor, the doctor at the hospital where he was admitted for treatment, and the local detective who came along to the hospital to take his statement. The others might have believed his story, the detective certainly did not. That Mr Thomas had been attacked was obvious enough, that it happened in the way he described was, in the opinion of Detective Constable Miller, a downright lie.

Now, Detective Constable Miller was a lowly member of the same County Police Force, headed by Chief Constable Nicholson, that had compiled the 'keep a look out for' dossier which landed on Watt's desk on the morning of that day. Detective Constable Miller had not himself put the dossier together, but he knew what was in it, and Mr Thomas's reference to being picked up in the park by the two men who assaulted him rang a little bell of recognition. 'Do you spend much time in the park?' he asked Mr Thomas. And when Thomas admitted that he did, Detective Constable Miller hazarded a further guess that perhaps Mr Thomas's car was a green Cortina with a little doll hanging in the back window?

Thomas's response to this was more than an admission. 'Everybody knows about my car,' he said with black despair.

'Who else is everybody?'

'Oh, nothing.'

Detective Constable Miller took a deep breath and thought hard before he plunged in. This was no longer a simple case of a punch-up and somebody getting hurt. If DC Miller shot any more questions at Mr Thomas he might find himself treading on the fringe of a serious crime investigation. If he handled it well he'd get a pat on the back, if he handled it badly he'd be ticked off for failing to refer it to his next up in line. But the suspect in front of him wasn't one of the tricky ones like those that the Crime Squad often referred to as their ten most wanted men, if he was anyone at all he was the man in the dossier whom every copper would describe as their least favourite villain. Shouldn't take much to get the truth out of him! Miller, seeing before him a commendation for quick thinking and a prospect of promotion, pressed on with his questioning. 'Come on, Mr Thomas. Who else knows about your green Cortina car? Would it be one of those little girls?'

Thomas tried to turn away
'No I don't mean that I mean . Oh God . I mean the man
who did this '

The man who assaulted you?'

'He knew about the car '

You said there were two men '

'It wasn't true There was only one '

Miller got his notebook ready to take down a description of
whoever it was that had so brutally beaten up Mr Thomas
'You'd better tell me about this man '

Thomas was still now, calmer now that the truth was beginning
to emerge 'The man who did this to me. . He said he was a
Crime Squad detective '

For the second time in twenty-four hours a dossier was forwarded
from Chief Constable Nicholson's Force to the Wyvern Regional
Crime Squad A slim dossier this time, containing only Mr
Thomas's statement and the hospital doctor's medical report. And
the phrase that was uttered as it passed from hand to hand was
not 'keep a look out for' but 'keep this to yourself' For the suspect
named in this dossier was no hard-line criminal or misbehaving
citizen, it was a police officer, a Regional Crime Squad officer
Mr Gilbert sat very still when he'd finished reading it, staring
hard at the most fragile of his precious pot plants Barlow grunted
his disbelief as he read the statement in his turn, then slammed
the dossier down on his desk and growled three times in a rising
crescendo, '*Bloody fool! Bloody fool! Bloody fool!*' John Watt
might have been reading *The Pigeon Fancier's Guide* for all the
emotion he showed as he read Mr Thomas's allegation, but
round and round in his mind the question was chasing itself
'What made him do it? What made him do it?'

In the outer office, the day was beginning as usual for Hawkins,
Box and Barbara Allin, whose peace of mind had not yet been
shattered by the appraisal of the contents of the slim dossier

'Did you have a nice security check yesterday?' Hawkins asked
Box.

'Security check ?' Box seemed puzzled by the question

'Dawson's, the jewellers,' Hawkins reminded him 'You went
there yesterday, didn't you?'

'Oh yes.'

'Took you long enough,' Hawkins grumbled

Box explained what had taken him so long 'The place is
dropping to bits Great locks on all the doors and windows, and
all you've got to do is lean on a wall and it'll fall down '

Hawkins nodded 'Better make out a report '

'I did that yesterday. Haven't you seen it?' Box found the

report on Hawkins's desk 'Came in and did it yesterday while you were out'

'Did you see Ben come in here?' Hawkins demanded of Barbara Allin

'No,' she said 'But then I was out as well'

'You were out Mr Barlow was out Mr Watt was out What was everyone doing?'

'Hunting down wicked criminals,' Barbara suggested

The telephone rang Box picked it up, answered it briefly and put it down again He stood for a moment looking at nothing, filling the room with his physical presence like a massive square-cut question mark Hawkins turned an inquiring look towards him

'Mr Gilbert wants a word with me,' Box explained And added with unconcerned humour, 'Probably wondering what I did with the stuff I nicked from Dawson's'

He went out to Mr Gilbert's office, leaving a sense of bewilderment behind

'Our Ben on the carpet?' Hawkins couldn't believe it

'Getting a medal, more likely,' Allin suggested

Hawkins's thoughts were whimsying around Box's possible punishment for 'nicking stuff from Dawson's' 'I must not rob jewellers' shops,' he mused 'I must not rob jewellers' shops five hundred times'

Allin stared at him 'What?'

'I'm only joking,' said Hawkins 'Ben couldn't possibly be in trouble'

Box stood on the carpet in front of Assistant Chief Constable Gilbert's desk, his hands loosely clasped in front of him, right hand round left wrist, his feet a comfortable twelve inches apart, as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar, and—as it sometimes seemed to Austin Gilbert—with no more emotional responsiveness than that Imperial relic of the past Gilbert looked down doubtfully at the slim dossier open in front of him, the medical report on one side, Mr Thomas's statement on the other 'Can you guess why I want to see you, Box?' he asked

Ben Box thought for a moment 'Could be a lot of things . . . sir'

'It happens to be about a certain James Edward Thomas' Gilbert's eyes were on Box's face as he dropped the name into the conversation, like dropping a catalyst into a test tube, but Box's expression showed no spontaneous reaction Gilbert pushed his spectacles firmly up on to the bridge of his nose and referred to the report in front of him 'James Edward Thomas was admitted to hospital last night suffering from cuts and bruises consistent

with having been assaulted yesterday afternoon. When questioned, he made a statement to the effect that the injuries were inflicted by a Crime Squad detective. Gilbert took off his glasses and looked up again at Box. 'Do you know who it is that he has named as his assailant?'

Barlow stood by the window in John Watt's office, jangling the loose change in his pocket. He'd been stood there like that for nigh on ten minutes now, saying nothing, staring out across the road at the barred windows of the detention floor of Wyvern's Bridewell police headquarters.

Watt broke the silence.

'It could be that he's made it up.'

Barlow turned to him. 'Who?'

'James Edward Thomas. It could be that he's ashamed of the real reasons for being knocked about, so he makes up this story of having been thumped by a copper.'

'By a Crime Squad detective.'

'There's only his word for that.'

'How many ordinary folk know of the existence of a Crime Squad? know it so well that it springs to their mind in preference to something else, like CID? And anyway he's given us a name.'

'And there's only his word for *that*.'

'How do you mean?'

Watt explained. 'On Thomas's own admission, the fellow who thrashed him never mentioned his own name.'

'Well, Thomas couldn't have made that up. not made it up and got it right. I mean, Detective Constable Box is not the first name you'd think of for a copper.'

'No,' Watt agreed. 'He knew of Ben Box all right. But I don't much like his reason for knowing.'

Box returned to the outer office from his interview with Mr Gilbert and immediately sat down at his desk, pulling the type-writer across in front of him, getting out statement forms and carbons from a drawer, neatly interleaving them and rolling them into the machine, and all this without a word to Hawkins and Allin who watched with puzzled curiosity. They exchanged a glance as Box thought for a moment, before beginning to type the statement. He was a fair hand at the machine, was Ben, his thick fingers striking the keys with unexpected delicacy and precision. He was like so many big men in that respect, remarkably nimble considering his size. He tap-tapped away without haste or hesitation, whatever it was that he was setting down must have been as clear in his mind as if it were happening there and then.

When he'd finished, he separated the typewritten sheets from the carbons and handed the top two copies to Hawkins and Allin 'I wonder if you'd mind checking this for typing errors and spelling'

'Certainly,' said Allin

'Both of us?' asked Hawkins

'If you wouldn't mind,' said Box 'You're bound to know what's in it soon enough You might as well have it now, from the horse's mouth sort of thing'

Allin and Hawkins swiftly read through their respective copies of the statement Barbara Allin finished first, but made no comment Hawkins finished a good two minutes after He held out his hand for Allin's copy and passed them both back to Ben And then all three of them waited for something to be said It was Hawkins who broke the silence with a 'Good lad, Ben' Then he briskly sat down at his desk and attacked a file with a great display of energy as Box took the several copies of his statement through to Mr Gilbert's office

At 1740 hours on the afternoon of Tuesday the 15th October 1968 I reported back to the Crime Squad office on the completion of some routine inquiries I had been making that day' Gilbert shifted in his chair Box's statement was clearly a long and detailed one It crossed Gilbert's mind that perhaps he should tell DC Box to sit down during the reading of it But a glance at the big man standing patiently in front of him reassured Gilbert that in the august presence of an Assistant Chief Constable, Box was probably more comfortable standing than sitting down Besides, the contents of the statement were far too serious for the relaxation of police discipline even to that minor degree Gilbert continued with his reading 'On entering the office, I was informed that a telephone message had been left for me by my wife, asking me to ring back as soon as I could I did so straight away What my wife told me over the phone was that my little daughter, Maureen, aged seven years, had been lost for several hours and was brought back home in a distressed condition It was only when I reached home that I learned the truth of what had happened' Gilbert stared at the words set down so composedly on the page Was it possible that Box had responded with equal composure to the actual telling of 'the truth of what had happened'? If so, what had subsequently driven him to behaving in so irrational a manner? Gilbert glanced over the sentences again, trying to see through them not just to the facts of what had occurred but to the feel of it ' . my little daughter . lost for several hours when I reached home I learned the truth of what had happened '

As soon as Box let himself in at the front door, his wife came out to the hall to meet him. Only a little slip of a thing was Janet. It used to be a joke in their courting days that he could eat her for breakfast and still have room left over for half a dozen rashers and a couple of eggs on toast. But her strength of character was equal to his, it was a strength they both needed in the face of what had happened to their daughter.

Maureen had been late getting home from school, which was unusual for her but not so much so that Mrs Box was immediately alarmed. Children do sometimes go to a friend's house for tea without a thought in their minds that their own tea is waiting or that someone ought to be told. It was a full two hours after her usual homecoming time, though, that a woman arrived with Maureen at the front door, a woman who had come across Maureen wandering alone on the Common, crying, and lost, and a long way from home. 'She was a nice woman,' said Janet, 'brought Maureen home in her own car.'

Ben Box wasn't immediately concerned with the niceness or otherwise of the woman who brought Maureen home from the Common. He had a more disturbing thought at the back of his mind. 'What was she doing on the Common in the first place?' When Janet hesitated, he demanded an answer. 'Janet!'

The answer he got was the one he half expected. 'The man took her there.'

'What man?'

Janet's self-control slipped for a moment. 'We don't know that, do we? I mean, he didn't leave a signed note saying "Dear Mr and Mrs Box, I just took your seven-year-old daughter to see some non-existent rabbits. . . ." She caught herself up again, being sensible, aware of the need to keep calm for Ben's sake as well as her own. Though he seemed calm enough as he waited for her to relate in her own way what had happened.

'Maureen was playing on the park swings. The man asked her if she'd like to see some rabbits in a field. She went with him in his car . . . a green car with a doll hanging in the back window and there weren't any rabbits . . . and he left her there.'

'On the Common.'

'Yes.'

'Is that all?'

'Did you want some more?' It was almost as though Ben were disappointed that there was nothing more to it, the policeman in him wanting a case, a good case that he could bring to Court with the certainty that it would result in a Guilty verdict and a long sentence. But Ben was also the father who needed reassurance, so she told him, 'The doctor examined Maureen and says she hasn't been harmed.'

Ben got to his feet and went to the door

'Where are you going?' she asked him

He seemed surprised at the question 'I'll talk to Maureen By tomorrow she'll have forgotten things, she'll start making things up

'For God's sake, Ben,' she raged at him, ' . stop being a policeman'

He stood by the door, awkward, concerned, and she knew that she was being unfair He would, as a policeman, use every effort to find whoever had done this to another man's child, why should he do any less for his own daughter? But he couldn't speak to Maureen now 'She's asleep,' she told him 'The doctor gave her a sedative'

He looked at her suspiciously 'You said she wasn't harmed'

'Not physically harmed'

'Then why give her a sedative?'

'She's suffering from shock'

He nodded his understanding, and his concern came to the surface again 'Have you taken anything?'

'No,' she told him

'I'll make you a cup of tea then'

He went out to the hall, but instead of going to the kitchen he quietly made his way up the stairs to the door of Maureen's bedroom He put his ear to the door-jamb and listened It was a moment before he could make out the light, even panting of a sleeping child He was about to turn away, satisfied, when a whimper broke into the child's steady breathing, a whimper which was repeated again and became a continuous crying. Box's face was expressionless, and his eyes looked beyond the walls of the landing, what he saw there was a green Cortina car with a little doll hanging in the back window and a faceless man at the wheel whose head he wanted to pound and pound and pound

'My wife informed me that our doctor had examined the child and ascertained that she was unharmed' Thank Heavens for that, thought Gilbert But it only made it all the more inexplicable that Box should then have taken it upon himself to pursue a personal vendetta against the man responsible For that was the only way to describe Box's behaviour the following day as set out in his statement 'In between my regular duties the next day I spent some time visiting parks, playgrounds and recreation grounds looking for a green car with a little doll hanging in the back window I knew of the likely places to cover from the dossier which reached the Squad office that morning giving details of similar complaints concerning a man in a green Cortina car I came across the vehicle

shortly after 14 00 hours parked near the infants' playground at Valley Fields. Sitting alone on a bench nearby was a middle-aged man in a neat grey business suit and overcoat whom I now know to be Mr James Edward Thomas. I sat down on the other end of the bench and engaged him in conversation. 'How did he do that, Gilbert wondered. Did he come straight out with . . . 'Are you the dirty old man who molested my little girl?'

'It's a lovely day,' was the simple conversational opening that Box had used.

The thin-faced man with the tired smile agreed that it was

Box looked benignly upon the children playing on the swings. 'Nice to see the kids having a good time.

Thomas's eyes followed one of the skywards-soaring children. 'Yes.'

For a moment they sat together, smiling upon the screeching, shrieking, hullabaloo of kids, until Box casually asked, 'Is that your car? the green Cortina?'

Thomas seemed startled by the question, but was in no way reluctant to admit that the car was his. Box explained his interest. 'I noticed the doll in the back window . . . wondered where you got it from. Only my little girl's always getting on at me, saying that we ought to have one. Did you get it for your kids?'

He knew what the answer was before Thomas uttered the words, 'I haven't got any children.'

'I see.' The one thing that Box usually lacked to make him a first-rate detective was the killer instinct that sharpens a flair for getting at the truth to the need for getting a man. This time, though, his outraged feelings had sharpened the need for him. His eyes were hard and cold as he watched Thomas's face for every shift of expression that played across it in response to his insinuating questioning.

'You enjoy watching children . . . ?'

'It's pleasant,' Thomas admitted.

'Are you like me?' . . . having the sort of job that gives you the freedom to come and go as you please?'

'Not exactly.' Thomas half turned away. 'It would take too long to explain.'

Box spread his arms along the back of the bench. 'I find this helps. Ten minutes' sunshine and fresh air straight after lunch. It's good to have a break when you're working hard.' He stared at Thomas as if to say 'go on, why don't you ask me what my work is.' And James Edward Thomas gave way to the compulsion that was his own as well as Box's and asked, 'What do you do?'

'I'm a Crime Squad detective.'

'That must be very interesting.'

'It is You meet all sorts of people '

'I suppose you must '

There was a double inevitability in their convergence upon a point of confrontation, Thomas's need for punishment and Box's need for vengeance leading them both on. Thomas did make one half-hearted attempt to break off the progression with an excuse of 'My wife's expecting me . . .' But he didn't even bother to finish the sentence, and Box made no attempt to dissuade him from going. They just stayed there, two quiet men sitting on a park bench in the sunshine, watching the children at play.

'You didn't say what your name was ' Box turned to him.

'My name? It's Thomas James Thomas '

The divulging of the name seemed to give Box an obscure satisfaction. His eyes dwelt on every aspect of Thomas's face. 'Your description fits. And the description of your car fits.'

Thomas said flatly, 'I don't understand what you're talking about.' But the words were only a formula. Box suggested, 'It'll be more private talking in my car, and less embarrassing.' He walked away from the bench, without a backward glance to see if Thomas was following. After a moment, Thomas rose to his feet and hastened to catch him up.

When they were both seated in the car, Box rested his hands on the upper rim of the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. 'I hope I haven't frightened you, Mr Thomas.'

Thomas cracked his knuckles and murmured 'no'.

'It's very simple, you see,' said Box. 'We've had a number of reports about a man who drives a green Cortina, like yours, with a doll hanging in the back window. And this man is in the habit of inviting little girls for rides in his car. He watches them at playgrounds and then invites them . . . and later on he dumps them miles from anywhere . . . such as on the Common.'

Thomas said, so quietly that it could scarcely be heard, 'Unharméd.'

Box turned his head with the first show of any kind of emotion since he'd started talking to Thomas, and his 'Really?' was a challenge, a challenge to which Thomas responded with a clear reaffirmation of 'Unharméd!'

Box retreated into passivity again. 'You're not denying it though?' he said calmly.

Thomas replied in a firm clear voice, 'There's nothing wrong in taking anybody for a ride in a car.'

Box thought about this for a moment, then started the engine.

'What are you doing?' Thomas demanded.

'Taking a ride in the car. We'll find a better place to talk. If you've no objection.'

'I suppose it's not for me to say.'

'That's right,' said Box. 'It isn't' He eased the car into the stream of traffic and drove off through the busy suburbs 'We've had six reports altogether,' he told Thomas, '... incidents of the sort I've described Three in Wyvern Park, two at Valley Fields, and one at the City Recreation Ground Do those names sound familiar?'

Thomas shrugged 'I suppose so'

'They don't include last night's incident,' Box pointed out

'Last night?' Thomas seemed to need to be reminded Perhaps he had forgotten how many incidents there had been or where they had taken place

'You took a little girl for a ride last night,' said Box, and then . . . very quietly 'Last night you picked my daughter'

Thomas showed a flash of alarm. The car was now leaving the outskirts of the town and approaching open country. 'Where are we going?' Thomas demanded

'Well . . . let's think about it first, Mr Thomas'

'Think about what?'

'About a little seven-year-old girl riding along in a green car with somebody she's never seen before. No idea where she's going No idea why Think about that, Mr Thomas.'

I didn't touch her,' Thomas said firmly

Box nodded his head 'I know The doctor was very reassuring'

Thomas found confidence in this His voice was assertive as he stated, 'That proves what I'm saying It proves that . . .'

Box interrupted him, 'Last night my little girl was crying in her sleep Think about that'

Thomas's face twisted as though a raw nerve had been touched 'Lots of people cry in their sleep.'

Box shook his head in a dogged denial 'Not my daughter She was crying in her sleep because somebody dumped her three miles from home. She isn't used to that That's why she cried' He looked out of the side window at the stretch of common through which they were passing 'Thing is I heard her'

He swung the wheel hard to turn the car on to a rutted track that vanished among the thickets. When they were out of the sight of the main road he stopped the car, got out, and walked round to the passenger door which he held open.

'Would you mind getting out of the car, Mr Thomas,' he asked

Thomas hesitated Perhaps he was going to be dumped on the Common, as Maureen had been, and left to walk to the nearest bus stop. If so, it was a childish form of revenge.

'Get out of the car please,' Box insisted. And when Thomas asked why, his quiet answer was, 'Because I say so.'

Thomas got out of the car slowly, reluctantly. 'I thought perhaps you were going to take a statement'

Box nodded as though this might indeed have been his purpose in bringing Thomas out on to the Common. And his next question showed a need of precise information which might be required in taking a statement 'Is this where you brought her?' he asked

Thomas made a vague gesture 'Round about here'

Box thrust his hands in his overcoat pocket and strolled across to the top of a rise from where he could presumably take note of the surrounding area for future reference. Outlined on the ridge top he looked like a granite monument, carved by some Cubist sculptor. The adamant bulk of him was somehow reassuring. Thomas walked over to him 'Are you going to take a statement?'

Box flickered a quick look at him, then looked away again

Mr Thomas waited a moment, shivering a little, although the autumn air was still quite warm. At last he asked, 'Why did you bring me here?'

Box turned to him with resolution 'I thought you'd like to see the rabbits' As he spoke his fist thudded to the side of Thomas's neck, bringing a twilight numbness that mercifully obscured the pain of the many blows that followed

'I do not remember how many times I struck him. Afterwards I returned to the Squad office and continued with my normal duties' Gilbert finished his reading of the statement and laid it down in front of him, carefully aligning it parallel with the edge of the desk 'Am I to understand that you reported none of this at the appropriate time?'

'No sir'

'Thank you, Box. I will, of course, discuss this with your senior officers, Mr Barlow and Mr Watt, before I decide on what action I shall take next'

'What has he decided?' Watt asked Barlow

'Depends on Mr Thomas, doesn't it, John . . . whether he presses a formal charge against Box'

'He's every right to'

'I know' Barlow thumped his fist on the desk 'Why did Box have to hammer the fellow?'

'Wouldn't you have done, in his shoes?'

Barlow glared at him 'Don't get me wrong now. I don't give a hoot about Thomas. Dirty little fellow . . . work him over every day and twice on Sundays as far as I'm concerned'

'Well then?'

'It's not what it does to them that bothers me, it's what it does to us. What Box has done makes him a bad copper, and by God, I care a lot if he's a bad copper'

Watt had to agree a bad copper, and a very sad one if Mr Thomas felt like making it really hot for him.

Gilbert went to call on Mr Thomas at home. His immediate impression on entering the house was of a hushed stillness that was more than the absence of sound, it was the silence of immobility. Shiny bits of furniture fixed by decree to their proper places, drawers and cupboards fast closed against the possibility of anything tumbling out, even the pot plants looked as though they were frozen at the stage of growth they had already reached on being brought into the house. Gilbert, who was a tidy man himself, found the atmosphere so hostile to any sort of intrusion that he refrained from taking off his coat and carried his hat clutched in his hands. Mrs Thomas led the way upstairs to where her husband was lying down and opened the door of a small single bedroom, with a small single bed, the sort of room that in the many similar houses in that row of semi-detacheds would probably be the bedroom of an older child, indeed, the few books and personal belongings that were in the room could have been those of a nearly grown-up son. But the Thomases, as Gilbert knew, were childless.

Thomas was lying flat in bed staring up at the ceiling where he kept his gaze fixed while his wife brought Gilbert into the room. It was only when she left, closing the door quietly behind her, that he let his head roll sideways to take in his visitor, still standing awkwardly by the door. 'There's a chair somewhere

Gilbert took the chair and sat down close by the bed. 'How are you feeling?' he asked.

Thomas seemed to be grateful for the show of interest. 'Quite well, thank you. Physically, that is. Otherwise . . . well, the doctor advises a complete rest.'

'You're not working at the moment?' Gilbert already knew that he wasn't, but thought it might be worth finding out why.

Thomas explained, 'I've not been working for ten weeks now. I was in an office, but things began to get a bit difficult. Pressures

Thomas rolled his head across so that he was looking at the wall instead of at Gilbert, who then briskly explained the formalities of the situation; that since Thomas's allegations were borne out by Box's own statement the facts of the matter were not in dispute, it was only the course of action that needed to be settled. It was Thomas's duty to lay a formal complaint against Box which would result in the case being dealt with in open court in the same way as if the assault had been committed by any ordinary member of the public.

Thomas caught at a loophole offered in the way that Gilbert presented this duty to him 'I'm not forced to make this complaint, then?'

'No'

'I mean, in court, it would all come out . what he did, and why he did it the provocation'

Gilbert's voice was cold as he answered, 'Almost certainly the court would be told of what happened to Box's little girl'

Thomas hesitated 'If that's my duty . I'd rather not do it'
'It's entirely your choice, Mr Thomas'

Thomas turned a faintly conspiratorial look upon Gilbert 'That would suit you as well, wouldn't it? Keeping it out of court would suit the police angle'

Gilbert's sharp response of 'There is no police angle' shattered Thomas's momentary welling up of confidence He asked Gilbert, 'What happens instead?'

Gilbert explained that Box could be dealt with at a private disciplinary hearing which Thomas would be asked to attend as a witness

'No press or anything?' Thomas asked cautiously

'A *private* hearing,' Gilbert stressed

Thomas was a little more jaunty now, almost enjoying his importance in the situation 'They weren't going to prosecute him, that was clear, he could afford to be grand about it 'I could come to a private hearing, I suppose'

Gilbert's lips tightened 'There is no need to be condescending, Mr Thomas'

'I'm sorry I didn't mean to be Although, when all's said and done, I didn't hit him, he hit me'

'Certainly he hit you,' Gilbert agreed, and took some satisfaction in adding, 'May I say, Mr Thomas, without being inhibited by witnesses, that I can fully understand why'

John Watt nodded his approval to Barlow as they listened to Gilbert's account of the interview with Mr Thomas 'What did you make of him, sir?' he asked

Gilbert searched for a summing up 'Strange household . odd sort of marriage separate rooms'

'That doesn't make them raving nutcases,' Barlow commented

Watt was thinking of his own broken marriage 'I sleep in a separate room myself'

Gilbert tried to amplify his feelings of oddity about the Thomas household 'I'm not saying that we should boil them in oil because they sleep apart It's just a tiny detail . among several.'

Barlow and Watt stared at him, wondering what gems of detection he would bring forth. 'The room he occupies . alone

Barbara Allin spelled it out. 'A black mark on your record sheet. A severe talking to by Chief Constable Nicholson . '

'And at the end of it he'll wink ' Harry leaned back, well satisfied with his cheering up efforts

Allin was more direct 'We're rooting for you, Ben '

Box smiled at her. 'Everybody's being kind and nice and understanding It's a bit like getting married '

'They're all on your side, Ben,' Hawkins assured him. 'Mr Gilbert, Mr Barlow . '

'Even my wife '

'Of course, your wife '

Barbara Allin seemed to have her doubts about the 'of course' She quizzed Ben, 'Janet's behind you, is she?'

'She says she's glad I did it '

'I thought your Janet was against violence bit of a pacifist '

'She says he deserved a good hiding and he got it Only thing that bothers me ' Box hesitated Allin and Hawkins looked at him, wondering what was the worry that was still niggling away Box half turned away from Hawkins and asked Allin, 'Have I ruined that man's life? Or was it ruined anyway?'

Allin seemed lost for an answer It was Hawkins who thumped his near-empty glass on the table and offered an encouraging, 'It was in a good cause, Ben '

Ben looked at him stolidly 'That sounds as though you're humouring me, Sergeant Hawkins Being tolerant Being understanding I don't need understanding I need kicking up the backside, Mr Barlow's best Bloody fool, he called me That's sensible That's the sort of thing you need to be told '

Harry was indignant Chucking his sympathy back in his face in favour of Barlow's backside-booting! 'Since when did you join the Barlow fan club, Ben?' He scooped up the empties and was about to take them off for a refill when Charlie Kidd came through from the Public Bar They all knew Charlie Not one of the Crime Squad that hadn't dropped him half a quid now and again for a piece of near useless information, or bundled him into the nearest nick for the local police to book on some petty thieving charge What was he flogging now? Sympathy it seemed 'Heard about your spot of bother, Ben '

Box allowed himself the nearest thing to a laugh that he'd had for a couple of days 'What newspaper did you see it in, Charlie?'

Charlie shrugged 'Who needs newspapers?'

'You don't, obviously ' Box wondered what was coming next He shouldn't have wondered He knew the feelings of the criminal world towards the sexual deviant: the lowest of the low, the ones to put the boot into at the first opportunity, to be reviled and spat upon by everyone from train robbers down to parking meter

thieves It was a reasonable assumption that all the Wyvern branch of the fraternity were behind Charlie when he proffered the message, 'On behalf of the union, Ben . . just to say that all the lads, they're all with you'

Ben made no reply It was Hawkins who responded for him 'Deeply appreciated, I think I may say, on behalf of my colleague here' And he and Box accepted Charlie Kidd's offer to refill the empty glasses in front of them

Hawkins looked round at the laughing, chattering, heartily normal throng in the pub, there was no need for Ben to worry, all was well with their world 'Even the lags are with you, Ben,' he pointed out

Box clasped his huge hands around his knee, and his thoughts were far from the pub as he answered, 'It isn't the lags that run the police force, is it'

As far as Detective Constable Box was concerned the police force was run by Chief Constable Nicholson Nicholson was head of the County Force that had compiled the original dossier on 'the man in the green Cortina', it was also the parent force from which Box was on loan to the Regional Crime Squad Chief Constable Nicholson was therefore responsible for Box's discipline and good conduct He sat behind his massive desk on the formal occasion of Box's disciplinary hearing, wearing full uniform, with the two rows of medal ribbons up as befitted the event One of the old guard was Mr Nicholson, one of those who came to the Police Service as fully fledged commanders, having served their 'prentice years in one or other of Her Majesty's Forces A mellow man, was Nicholson, but he knew how to lash out at transgressors and make it sting He would be just in his judgement, but not necessarily merciful

In the appendant ante-room, Box sat beside Barlow, waiting to be called in to judgement He would ordinarily have felt that it was somehow unseemly sitting down together with a Chief Superintendent, rather like a curate sharing a stall with a bishop, but for this once it was as though they were both as little children in the ante-room of God himself . the Chief Constable of the County Mr Gilbert had passed them several times, going in and out of Nicholson's office, bringing them to their feet on each occasion And on each occasion, Box's sense of apprehension was heightened by Gilbert's look of earnest importance and the impressive appearance of the documents he carried On the last occasion of his passing through, he seemed to be a little flustered He paused for a word with them before going in to the Chief's office 'There'll be a slight delay, Charles,' he said to Barlow 'Unexpected development' And then to Box with what was meant

to be a reassuring look he added, 'Nothing for you to worry about'

'I wonder how it's going?' Barbara Allin had made three attempts to read through the stolen car summary in front of her, but her mind refused to take in the sense of the figures Hawkins was finding it equally hard to concentrate on his expense sheet, even though he had a greater incentive for making his figures add up correctly. They both momentarily gave up the struggle.

'Be halfway through by now,' Hawkins surmised

'Poor old Ben'

'All because he clobbered some bloke that should be written off anyway. Dirty little man'

'Written off?' Allin's head came round slowly to look him full in the face, it was a warning signal that Hawkins should have recognized. 'What exactly do you mean by "written off"?' she demanded. Hawkins considered the question for a brief moment, then suggested 'Painless destruction maybe. Can't say I've given it serious thought'

Her tone was dangerously reasonable as she asked, 'Don't you think that a copper with your experience should have given it serious thought?'

Hawkins had already had enough of the discussion. 'Got a lot of things on my mind already. Like thief catching'. He went back to adding up his expenses. But Allin would not let the subject rest.

'I'm surprised at you'

He was tight lipped as he answered, 'A lot of people are'

'I mean, this is what the job's about. Isn't it?' she demanded

'Maybe to you. But social reform wasn't on my training course'

'You don't need training to leave things a little better than you found them'

Hawkins shook his head. 'You're wrong. You find the dirt and shovel it quickly and quietly out of the way'

There was real anger now in Allin's voice. 'I'm sorry, but I think it's you that's wrong'

In the adjacent office, Watt looked up as the angry words pattered against the half-glassed partition. Through the frosted panes he could just make out the shapes of Hawkins and Allin sitting at their desks. Faintly their voices carried to his ear.

'People no better than animals . . .' it was Hawkins's growl, need treating like animals . . .'

'Take them away . . . put them down . . . is that what you mean?'

Hawkins protested, with an attempt at good humour, 'I thought it was Ben Box supposed to be getting the hammer today'

Watt rose to his feet and went to the connecting door as Allin

flatly stated, 'Ben's done us a service. He's made us all hold up our hands to be counted'

'All I'm saying . . .', said Hawkins, ' . . . is if the cap fits ' '

'The black cap, presumably. Kill people, is that it?' Allin was in a full flood of anger now . . . 'You're not talking about the Crime Squad, you're talking about the flaming Gestapo' Hawkins tried to slip in an appeasing word, but she would have none of it 'My way, at least there's a ray of hope . . . your way, there's no hope at all'

Watt had had enough of their squabbling. He yanked the door open. 'Something wrong?' he demanded.

Hawkins's look of unconcern as he said 'nothing' wouldn't have fooled a police cadet out on the beat for the first day.

'I didn't overhear a violent debate?' Watt put to them.

'Just discussing a matter of principle,' Hawkins told him.

'Sounded like a couple of kids fighting to me' Watt had been deceptively soft-tongued so far; now he lashed out at the pair of them, 'If you want to act like kids, get yourselves out of this office and away on to the swings in the park. Otherwise act like grown-ups and get on with the job in hand.'

They both murmured their apologies as Watt closed the door on them and went back to his desk, there was a half smile on his face as he sat down, if Ben Box was getting no worse a tongue-lashing from Chief Constable Nicholson, he'd survive.

Nicholson sat up straight in his high-backed chair, finger-tips together, forearms resting on the heavily carved old-fashioned desk, silver-flecked dark hair matching the silver-braided uniform set off by the fruit salad rows of medal ribbons; taken in all, it was the perfect picture of a Chief Constable. And not Barlow, nor Watt, nor any plainclothes detective in all their bowler-hatted glory was ever as one of these.

Barlow stood beside Box in front of the desk, the prisoner's friend Gilbert, as befitted the role of prosecuting counsel, stood to one side. But it seemed that there was no prosecution evidence to be presented.

'You do understand the situation, Box?' Nicholson asked.

'Yes sir' Box understood all right; Gilbert had explained to him a few moments before that Mr Thomas had sent a letter round by hand saying that he had changed his mind, that he did not wish to give evidence; Box could quite understand that James Edward Thomas would rather not have his dirty little habits talked about any more; which meant that if Box withdrew his plea of guilty the case could be dropped. But Box, having his own sense of what was proper, had chosen to let the hearing go forward and accept the consequences, which made it easier for Barlow to speak with

absolute sincerity of his high regard for Box's integrity and common sense

The case proceeded, with Nicholson gravely listening to the summary of evidence as crisply presented by Mr Gilbert Box didn't need to listen. He'd thrashed James Edward Thomas, there was no argument about that. When it came to his turn to speak, he told Chief Constable Nicholson that given the same situation he would do the same thing again.

'But it wouldn't be the same situation, Box,' Nicholson pointed out.

Box insisted, 'If I heard my little girl crying in her sleep.

Nicholson, who was as logical as well as a patient man, explained carefully, 'It wouldn't be the same, Box. The added experience of this inquiry would modify the circumstances and, I'm sure modify your course of action.'

Box fixed his gaze on a point just above Nicholson's head as he responded, 'Perhaps, sir.'

Nicholson drew a deep breath. 'Next time, Box, if there is a next time, you must do the correct thing. It is my responsibility to ensure that you do just that.' And the full weight of this responsibility was now poured forth upon Box's head, with a brimstone and sulphur flavour to it that explained why, in his military days, Nicholson had been known as 'Old Nick'. He spoke of the evil consequences of police officers taking the law into their own hands, of the subsequent inefficiency, breakdown of discipline, and ultimate chaos. He pointed out that Box had left the door open to further evils by preventing them taking official action against Thomas and putting a stop to his offences. Box had been rash and selfish. Mr Nicholson appreciated the mitigating circumstances and sympathized with Box at the personal level. But as a Senior Police Officer, he could offer Box no sympathy whatsoever. 'You will be severely reprimanded and your Record Sheet will be endorsed to that effect.'

A severe talking to, a black mark, just as Harry Hawkins and Barbara Allin had predicted, even to the wink that followed, which took the form of an affable 'How is your little girl now?' from Nicholson.

'More or less back to normal, thank you, sir,' Box told him.

'And your wife?'

'Very well, thank you, sir.'

Janet would be tickled to know that the Chief had asked after her. She wasn't to know that Chief Constables are always asking about people's wives, even when they've never met them. The human touch—a mark of their importance. Meant a great deal to people, all the same. Janet now... it might reassure her that everything really was back to normal.

But Box was aware that nothing would ever be the same again. That black mark on his Record Sheet would stay with him for the rest of his career, taken into account every time he was considered for promotion, remembered against him whenever his merits were weighed against those of another officer whose Record Sheet was absolutely clean. It didn't sound much, it was to be the first step towards Box's untimely resignation from the Force.

'Took it like a trooper, John.' Barlow was in high good spirits as he gave John Watt an account of Box's disciplinary hearing over a glass of ale in the pub that evening. Allin and Hawkins at a table nearby, their crime and punishment argument now forgotten, were equally elated. They all left just before closing time, Allin and Hawkins going off on an inquiry that would take them round all the sleazy clubs in Wyvern and keep them on the go until near dawn the following morning. Barlow and Watt, as befitted their senior ranks and because there was no major inquiry on just then, going off to their separate homes.

Watt let himself into the one room and kitchenette flat that was his home in Wyvern. He took his shoes and his jacket off and then couldn't bother to undress any more; couldn't bother to make himself a bite to eat nor even to brew up a cup of coffee. He stretched himself out on the divan bed, hands clasped at the back of his neck, staring up at the ceiling. He wasn't drunk, he wasn't particularly tired. It had been a soft day really. And with the Box affair neatly out of the way, he ought to be in a better mood. Ben Box would be feeling chipper, all right; going home to his Janet and his little Maureen, who like as not had forgotten all about the nasty man who took her to see the rabbits which weren't there, and after all, that was all he'd done. At the worst she'd feel the disappointment of not seeing no rabbits. Maybe he, John Watt, would buy the kid a toy one for a present, sort of consolation present, and it might make Ben feel a bit better about that black mark too. Ay, he'd do that. In the morning, big, soft, cuddly bunny rabbit to go with all the other toys which, if he knew anything about it, were likely everywhere underfoot in the Box household.

Toys. Kids. . . No toys in the Thomas household. No kids neither. . . altogether a cheerless place, according to Mr Gilbert. Wonder what Mr Gilbert would say on seeing him, John Watt, in his not particularly cheerful one-roomed flat. He, John Watt, slept alone. But then he'd no missus to sleep with. Pity that. . . could have worked out if things had only been different. . .

He was near asleep now, was John Watt, already knowing that he'd wake again at the black hour of three in the morning, miserably aware of being alone. James Edward Thomas slept alone. . .

even though he had a missus His choice or her choice? No
kids his fault or her fault? Husbands . wives . some got
on, some didn't . bit of a mess all round Ah, what the hell!
John Watt slept

DIVERSION

(from the television script by Robert Barr)

THOSE WERE the lean years for John Watt, the years at Wyvern. The work was lean and spare, not like the sprawling, brawling days at Newtown where Barlow and Watt were regarded by everyone on their manor, even by the villains, with as much pride and affection as the Liver birds perched above the pier head, it was a cold war on crime at Wyvern, fought out unfeelingly between top professionals on both sides.

And Watt's home life, if it could be called that, was equally lean and spare. A room to sleep in, to go out from first thing in the morning, and to return to late at night. If he made any close friends during that time, or took up any hobbies to replace the pigeon racing of Newtown days, he kept very quiet about it. John Watt seemed to live for his work. With the result that he was as good, if not better at it, than he ever had been. A bit quieter, a bit more contained, and a lot more thoughtful, but without any doubt the second best detective anywhere south of the Mersey. Barlow had no doubt as to who was the best.

It was near the end of that time that Watt's ways took a turn that astonished Barlow. John Watt began going to art exhibitions, chamber music concerts, even taking time out to go for a decent meal instead of making do with a plate of sandwiches. There had to be a woman in the picture, and there was.

Doctor Morrow had been called in by the police on a murder inquiry. Dr Jean Morrow. An attractive little bit, John Watt thought when he first met her, but a bit bossy. He wasn't sure that he could fancy a woman who made it so plain that she took an interest in him, but there was no harm in seeing her occasionally. The occasions became more frequent, though, and when the opportunity came for Watt to seek promotion away from Wyvern, where Jean was in general practice, he began to wonder whether he wanted to leave the district at all. Wyvern hadn't been that bad, and at any rate it was getting better.

The advertised appointment that John Watt had applied for, and which would have meant his moving from the West Country,

was the post of Head of CID of Thamesford Constabulary. Thamesford was one of the newly amalgamated Constabulary Forces that took in several of the old County and Borough Forces, and was now the third largest police force in the country. Appointment as Thamesford's Head of CID would mean increased rank, pay, and prestige. It would also mean working for a new boss, Mr Cullen, the Chief Constable of Thamesford. It was said of Cullen that if ever the revolution came, they'd send for him to quell it. A tough boss as tough as they came, tougher than Charlie Barlow even. Working for him would be no rest cure.

Getting the job came first, though, which wasn't going to be easy to start with and became more questionable when John Watt learned, just before leaving for the interview, that Barlow was going up for it as well. The cunning old beggar, not saying a word about it till now! Well, Charlie Barlow might be more senior in rank and more experienced in command, but he, John Watt, would give him a run for his money.

It was a short run that came a cropper over John Watt's stability of background. Cullen stuck the needle in to probe the sore point—the broken marriage several years before, and though Watt hinted that there might be a second marriage in the offing, it wouldn't stand comparison with Barlow's cosy domestic life of over twenty years' standing, with a wife who never said too much or too little, and a near grown-up daughter starting on a University career. Whether it was that alone that tripped John Watt, or whether there were other factors as well, none but the interviewing committee would ever know, but it was Barlow who got the Thamesford job. Which left John Watt sweating on the top line for Barlow's old job on the Regional Crime Squad in Wyvern.

It was the first break in the partnership since the two of them had come together at Newtown nine years before. Barlow had been a thruster then, pressing for the use of the still relatively untried Z Cars in his Division, and proving their worth under his command. Now, in Thamesford, with a bigger patch to cover, stretching from the outskirts of London to the mouth of the Thames, reaching down to the Channel ports and up to the East Anglian marshes, Barlow put his mind to the problem of exercising effective control over his far-flung empire. And the answer he came up with was Task Force control—organizing the scattered crime fighters under his command. CID, crime patrol cars, dog-handlers; Divisional forces and Headquarters' forces—into unified groups, like Commando groups, capable of moving anywhere in strength and fast.

Chief Constable Cullen approved the idea, and characteristically thrust his own massive hand into the selection of the Task Forces' personnel. A first and obvious choice as one of the middle rank

officers was Harry Hawkins, at one time detective sergeant under Barlow at Wyvern, now an inspector in one of Thamesford's divisions. A far more difficult choice was for the key position of Commander of Number One Task Force. It was Cullen's decision that John Watt should be brought in for this. Barlow himself was not so keen on it. After their rivalry for the job as Head of Thamesford CID, how would Watt take to the notion of coming to Thamesford now, not in the glorified rank he'd aimed at, but once again as number two to Barlow? Watt wasn't sure that he cared for it all that much himself. But the opportunity for promotion at Wyvern was sliding away, with an outsider being considered for Barlow's old job in preference to John Watt. So Watt came to Thamesford, with Jean Morrow finding a new medical appointment for herself not too far away.

So the three Wyvernites, Barlow, Watt and Hawkins, once again found themselves working in close harmony on setting up Thamesford's Number One Task Force and making it function effectively. Barlow was more pleased than he would admit that the man putting his theories into practice would be John Watt, clever John, who needed only a nod and a wink to understand what Barlow wanted, Watt was not too displeased at being second in line to Barlow as Head of CID, since he was also his own number one as Head of the independently controlled Task Force. As for Harry Hawkins, ambition had not yet stiffened up his easy-going ways, he was sorry to lose the importance of being a big frog in the small divisional pond, but what the hell.

Task Forces were the boys who would be there wherever it was happening, and that's where Harry Hawkins wanted to be.

But the first planned operation that John Watt set up for his Task Force wasn't exactly what Hawkins had expected. He knocked at the door to Watt's private office and went in. Watt looked past him to where the personnel of the newly created Number One Task Force were assembling in the general office beyond. This was his command, police men and police women, uniformed and plain-clothed, detectives, dog-handlers, crime patrol men, young, keen, the pick of Thamesford's best. They stood about or perched on the edges of desks; a little conscious of their newly elected importance but determined not to show it; kidding each other and the unit they now represented. 'Is that right? . . . we're getting roller skates to shift quicker?' 'You'll get a good kick up the behind from Mr Watt. That'll shift you.' Jackson, the administrative sergeant, solemn-faced and with a youthful sense of occasion, was handing out photostatted copies of Task Force Information Sheet, Series A, Number One. Photographs, maps and street plans marked with coloured pins were fastened to a board, and the slide projector stood ready.

As Watt and Hawkins came through to the general office, Sergeant Jackson, nervously eager, snapped out a sharp 'Stand up!' that wasn't absolutely necessary, the lads could usually be relied on to get to their feet in their own time. Still, it was a fault the right way in Sergeant Jackson's attitude, best to be too keen than not keen enough. John Watt flapped a hand at the lads and lasses, giving them permission to ease off a bit, and ran his eye quickly over all their faces as they settled down, most of them new to him, but one or two like Evans, the fat Welsh crime patrol sergeant, and Miss what-was-her-name, Betty Donald, the little snippet of a policewoman detective. Those two had been on the murder inquiry that Barlow had slammed the Task Force into while it was yet being formed and before Watt had hardly had time enough in Thamesford to get his feet wet. But that's the way with murders, they have to be tackled off the cuff, whether you're ready for them or not. This op was going to be different, carefully planned beforehand, a model for all Task Force operations in future. Looking at the file again, those several years after, John Watt recalled the details of the briefing.

The operation mounted for that afternoon was of the kind that had been designated as a 'saturation exercise'. Picking a small area of a town where there had been a persistent pattern of similar crime over a long period, and packing that area with so many police officers that the prospective villain would not be able to take a step without being seen by a copper on the way in, or bumping into one on the way out.

The villain they were looking for was still a bit of a mystery. The Task Force crews watched and listened as a number of faces were projected on to the viewing screen, while Hawkins gave a commentary on the records of these suspects, petty thieves mostly, whose class was near enough similar to that of the villain they were hoping to catch. But there were no known villains whose techniques exactly matched the pattern of persistent crime that had attracted Task Force attention.

The crime itself was common enough. Break-ins, or more accurately sneak-ins, for there was little breaking done to effect entry, the thieves preferring to take advantage of doors or windows left unlatched. Sneak-ins are common enough in a random pattern over any area, but in this case there had been a rash of them over a patch of only five small streets, five streets totalling only sixty-four houses, and pretty crummy houses at that, where there was nothing of any account worth pinching, but over the past few weeks, between the hours of two and four, and always on Monday to Friday afternoons, those five streets had been the scene of no less than thirty-one sneak-ins.

It was what was being lifted in the sneak-ins that almost brought

the element of farce into the situation. The loot was mostly in cash; and in the kind of houses that were being done the amounts of cash lying around were rarely more than two or three pounds, the total lifted in the thirty-one jobs over twelve weeks was only £96. Ninety-six pounds. It seemed little enough to show for twelve weeks of careful, cunning, conniving theft; and it seemed too little to justify the deployment of so large a section of hard-pressed police resources. But there was nothing farcical about the loss of that money to the breadliners from whom it was nicked, and anyway, it was all crime, and today's sneak-in merchant can be tomorrow's bank robber, so John Watt was determined that there was going to be nothing farcical about the pursuit of these criminals. It was going to be as carefully calculated and carried out as any Commando raid.

'We have two hours in which to expect results,' he told the Task Force crews, 'between two and four, with an extra hour at each end to get into position and pull out again. You'll leave here at 13 00 hours precisely. It's now eleven minutes to the hour. You were given an early meal break. If you haven't taken it, that's your fault, and you'll know better next time. You've just time, though, for a quick cuppa in the canteen, and then you're off. Any more questions?'

There were none. Hawkins reminded the crews, 'I want to see you cleared and on your way by one o'clock.' They left the Task Force office, skylarking along the corridor, already starting a legend about their boss. 'He's a tough nut.' 'Don't he ever smile?' 'Good thief-catcher, though', suddenly falling silent and straightening up as Barlow passed them on his way to have a word with John Watt.

'Passed your lot on the way to the canteen, John.'

Watt knew that Barlow wasn't mentioning this for the sake of making small talk. He wondered what was coming. Barlow was studying the large-scale street map of the area to be covered by that afternoon's operation.

'Five small streets. Sixty-four houses. And you've got how many men and vehicles to cover it?'

Watt told him.

'A bit heavy that, John? All for one joker hanging about sneaking in?'

Barlow seemed to be niggling, getting at him for something or other. Watt thought he knew what it was. There'd been all the excitement of setting up the Task Forces, selecting the men, planning the style of operations, in all of which Barlow had taken a leading part. But now that they were operational it was Watt's turn at taking the active lead while Barlow had to sit back and await the first results. And Charlie Barlow was never happy at

sitting back Well, a word of explanation of strategy might curb the old beggar's impatience, though it didn't ought to be necessary 'I want them saturating this little area . . ' Watt tapped the street plan, ' . . merging into it so tight that when I walk through I'll maybe not notice them And then I want them back here To talk about it To make written reports of every movement in these streets, minute by minute, through the afternoon All dove-tailing in like a film. So they'll know what saturation means, what observation means, what team-work means '

Barlow grinned at Watt's solemn theorizing 'I thought the idea was to make an arrest '

'If a house is done, I'll expect an arrest '

Barlow's look in response to this plainly told John Watt that a break-in with no arrest would be regarded with extreme disfavour But that could happen, even with so many men on the ground, when the team was new, and the system was new 'They need to be phased in,' he reminded Barlow 'It's what we agreed '

'I'm not criticizing '

'You could have fooled me '

Barlow looked a bit shame-faced 'I must have picked up the habit '

'From Mr Cullen?'

'From Mr Cullen Wanting something big Something to show that Task Forces can make a difference '

'He's being impatient '

'No he's being enthusiastic Because he trusts us, he's keen to show it does work '

'That's good,' said John Watt 'I like to be trusted '

The Task Force was on the move, reports coming into Thamesford Operational Control Room one after another in rapid succession

T Foxtrot One on watch, T Foxtrot Two on watch, TF Five TF Four Hawkins, sharing a car with Sergeant Evans, was the first to check in at 13 00 hours precisely By two minutes past the hour the last of the Task Force vehicles completed the checking in to the approval of John Watt who had stepped along to the Control Room to hear it for himself Watt always found the atmosphere of the Control Room very soothing He liked the quiet calm way of dealing with every report from that of a lost kitten to a big bank raid alarm He was quite sure that if one of the patrol men ever came up on the air with a report that 'The Martians have landed They're taking over the world', the Duty Officer would respond to it, as he did to any other report, with an unruffled 'Your message timed at 13 02' Inspector Reid was today's Duty Officer, supervising the marking up of the big wall map that showed the disposition of every vehicle, every check-

point, every operational control point in the whole of the Thamesford area. The last of the Task Force vehicle markers was just going up under his direction, the small magnetic rectangle representing the Crime Patrol car being placed at the tail end of the others already shown as travelling eastwards in a tight convoy between Headquarters at Kingley and the operational area at Greybourne.

'All on their way, sir,' Reid reported to Watt.

That's nowt to make a song and dance about, thought Watt. 'It won't strain them, I don't think,' he commented to Reid, 'driving out to Greybourne.'

Reid glanced up at this dry, sardonic man that he still had to get accustomed to. Was that meant as a joke? Better play it straight. Don't take anything for granted with a Superintendent when you're only an Inspector. He just answered with a quiet 'No sir.'

Just below the Inspector's supervisory position one of the civilian control room girls was broadcasting a report of a stolen vehicle, giving its description, type, and registration number. Watt's ear automatically took in the details that he would keep a look out for it if he were on the streets: light blue five-hundredweight Fordson van. 'J & R Stevens, Household Repairs' on the side. Shouldn't be too difficult spotting that. Why hadn't the silly beggars taken a plain van? And his mind immediately raced ahead to the conclusion that whatever the van had been taken for was likely intended to be over and done with before the search for it got too hot. Joy riding? nick the gear in the back and then ditch it? Household repair gear could be worth quite a bit. Ah well, there were enough trained men on the roads keeping an eye out for it without him, John Watt, bothering his head.

In the Task Force cars the observers were noting the details of the Fordson van on their missing vehicles lists. Not that they would waste any time looking for it, but if they did happen to spot it, a quick word to Control Room would give someone else the chance of intercepting it and maybe nabbing the thieves.

'We aren't the only coppers on the Force,' Hawkins made the point to the fat, Welsh, uniformed Sergeant who was driving him at the head of the Task Force convoy. 'It has to be fair shares for all.'

'If we get our boyo this afternoon', Evans mused, '... it won't be much of a share.' He glanced at the following Task Force vehicles in the rear view mirror. 'One sneak-thief between sixteen of us - not much to boast about.'

Hawkins gave him a hard look. 'Do you mean that?'

'It's what the report would say - one minor arrest.'

Hawkins was silent for a moment, then said quietly, 'Supposing this time the sneak-thief was in the house and the woman came home. Supposing she saw him And he took a hammer . . or his jemmy

'That would be a major arrest ay'

'I had a chief once' Hawkins told him, 'a Taffy, like you Hated housebreakers Thought it the most dangerous crime on the calendar If they are disturbed a defenceless citizen always near to murder, he said Had you thought of that?'

Evans tried to excuse his apparent belittling of the operation they were on 'It was the way Mr Watt put it that we're just limbering up'

Hawkins hammered home his point 'When a criminal breaks into a house it's always serious, don't forget that' He was already turning a sharp eye to the vehicles they were passing 'And until we get to Greybourne, keep a lookout for that missing van'

Watt was on his way out of the Control Room, passing the row of uniformed sergeants taking incoming 999 calls as one of them turned to Reid and called out, 'Inspector Emergency on Seventeen Will you take it' Then, as he switched the call to Reid's position he murmured to the sergeant next to him, 'Armed hold-up'

Watt stopped, head down, back still turned to where Reid was sitting, forcing himself not to look round This was the Duty Inspector's responsibility, dealing with emergencies, deciding which units were best situated to tackle it Chances were about two to one that it would be Watt's Task Force, but he wouldn't interfere until the decision was made Behind his back, he heard Reid repeating the details given over the phone by whoever was reporting the hold-up 'Haynham Timber Works Alderton Road, Haynham' Watt glanced up at the big wall map Haynham where the Devil was it? He wasn't yet familiar with every small town on this vast patch Haynham . . somewhere in the eastern stretch, wasn't it? Ay there! By cripes

it was just a stone's throw from Greybourne where his Task Force was now heading And they were only after a sneak-thief this was an armed hold-up No doubt which had top priority What was Inspector Reid waiting for? He had Number One Task Force under his hand, ready to cope with emergencies such as this and in an ideal position to do it They could reach the scene of the hold-up fast and in strength . . and that was what Task Forces were about So get them shifting, man Get them shifting! Watt spun round, unable to hold his impatience any longer And then he was thankful that he'd checked his haste at least this long, for Reid was already pressing keys on his control panel, directing the shifting of markers on the wall map, and flicking the broadcast

switch of the microphone in front of him: 'X-ray to No 1 Task Force units on deployment to Greybourne Red alert.'

In the cars, hands automatically reached for the radio volume controls to bring in this alert at full strength, drivers swung to better positions on the road from where they could move off in any direction that the call should take them, in the Headquarters offices where monitor speakers relayed the Control Room broadcast, Sergeant Jackson stopped his typing and bent his ear closer to the speaker box, Barlow thrust his hands against the edge of his desk and pushed his chair back ready to jump up from it, and Chief Constable Cullen held his pen poised over the confidential report he was completing. It was the first test of the efficiency of John Watt's Task Force. How would they shape up to it?

Hawkins, in the lead car, was already noting the details of the redeployment 'armed hold-up timber warehouse. Haynham'. His fingers were fidgeting on the press button switch of the radio microphone as Reid began his detailing of the individual vehicles 'X-Ray to Inspector Hawkins in T Foxtrot One'.

'Hawkins to X-Ray'

'Immediate Go to Haynham Timber Works, 106 Alderton Road, Haynham. See Mr Murdoch in cashier's office. Further details of armed hold-up will be broadcast as you go.'

'Understood'

Evans thrust his foot down, heading for the roundabout ahead where he could swing right for Haynham. Hawkins glanced at his watch and jotted down the time. Thirteen-fourteen. Less than a quarter of an hour since they'd toddled off from Kingley Hall Headquarters on what was intended to be a gentle limbering-up exercise. This was more like it. Breaking-in the lads the hard way.

The wall map in the Control Room showed the changes in the disposition of the Task Force vehicles, Hawkins's car heading for Haynham, the others setting up check-points which formed a close ring round the scene of the crime. While this redeployment had been under way, Watt stood back and let Reid get on with it. Now he moved up to Reid's Control position. 'What do we know about the hold up?'

Reid passed him the message form on which the details had been noted. Watt's lips tightened as he read it. Another lot of these jokers with guns, popping off shots right, left and centre. What did they do it for, when they'd got the money anyway? Maybe it was only a warning shot, but even warning shots could hit people, and if these fellows were already using firearms to get clear. 'Put out another lot of road blocks,' he told Reid, indicating an outer circle round the scene of the incident, '... if

they crash the inner circle that still gives us a second go at them And where's the nearest police station to where it happened?' 'There's one in Haynham,' Reid informed him

'I want every available man of my Number One Task Force other than those on the road blocks reporting there I'll be on my way' Watt hesitated, but only for a split second, and tell Mr Barlow It's likely he'll want to be there too

Haynham was a small country town with one main road going through it, off which there were several side turnings that weren't even properly made-up roads where a number of light rural industry premises were situated One of these was the timber yard where the robbery had taken place, not a likely target for a hold-up unless the thieves knew beforehand that there was something on the premises worth nicking Hawkins had this in mind as he asked Mr Murdoch, the elderly chief cashier, 'The two lads who forced their way into this office had you seen either of them before?'

Murdoch seemed surprised at being asked this 'No'

'Complete strangers, were they?'

'Yes'

Hawkins took in the dusty office with a look round it 'They just walked in with a gun on the off chance of picking up six hundred pounds in a ramshackle old place like this?'

Murdoch just stared at him, mouth slightly agape He was too much of an old fool to be concealing anything And there were many ways the thieves could have found out about the money being on the premises without coming anywhere near it Someone who'd been sacked working off a grudge, any of the employees making a regular habit of opening his wage packet in the pub nearby, the lorry drivers checking their loads in and out would know what went on in the office, all sorts of sources of information, deliberate or accidental It was more important to try to get a line on the thieves themselves, particularly the one with the gun

'Did you think he was going to use it?' Hawkins asked

'He did use it' Murdoch pointed at the bullet hole high up on the wall

'Before that though Was he trying to scare you?'

'He certainly did Kept pointing it here there' Mr Murdoch was acting it out now, 'kept swinging it around Looked a bit mad'

Hawkins checked a smile at the little man's antics, there'd be no need for anyone to point a gun to frighten Mr Murdoch All the same, it had its serious side, someone had pointed a gun and fired it

'Did you hear the shot?' he asked his other witness

Mr Hughes had been delivering a lorry load of timber at the

time of the raid, but when he drove into the yard the thieves were already making their getaway

'You can see the entry,' he pointed it out to Hawkins 'Not much room there Well, this van was coming towards me, pushing its way out, blowing on the horn to make me back up'

'And you did?'

'Yes Well I didn't know ' He seemed to feel that he was being accused of having let the thieves escape Hawkins reassured him, 'Well, you wouldn't know So you let it pass you.'

'Yes'

'Description?'

'Van light blue van Fordson, I think . about the average size, five hundredweight they are Oh, and on one side, the side I saw, it had J & R Stevens, Household Repairs'

'Did you see who was in it?'

'Only the driver'

'What was he like?'

'Young fellow about twenty-four Wearing a blue boiler suit And what I thought was funny, a clean white shirt and a dark tie under it'

'The van Did you get the registration number?'

'No I had no reason Not until I found out what had happened'

It was fair enough, thought Hawkins Mr Hughes had done well in providing this much information With the fairly thorough descriptions of the two thieves who had broken into the cashier's office, and a partial description of the third one who had stayed at the wheel of the van, they'd have a flying start in tracing them Best get that much information in fast let everyone know who and what they were looking for

Three minutes later the broadcast went out from Headquarters Control Room giving full descriptions of the three wanted men and the van they were driving Watt and Barlow heard it at Haynham Police Station where the briefing of the Task Force crews was due to take place Watt listened gloomily to the description of the van He'd had the feeling, when he'd overheard it reported missing less than half an hour before, that it was being taken for something pretty much in the offing. If he'd sharpened up the watch for it . But there were so many vehicles nicked every day, impossible to mount a full-scale search for each one of them or there'd be no resources available for the real emergencies like getting after these three young tearaways, one of whom was far too handy with the revolver he carried for anyone's peace of mind

Barlow's thoughts were clearly running on the same lines 'If one of them's armed . . and ready to use it .'

'Only once . as a warning shot,' Watt emphasized

'He may use it again'

'Maybe Maybe not'

'Even so Are you thinking of issuing arms?'

Watt said 'No' very firmly. It was his Task Force, his operation, and his decision. This wasn't a situation where arming his lads would do any good, they didn't even know yet where there was anything to shoot at. Barlow accepted John Watt's decision and took a back seat in the briefing room where the Task Force crews were assembling. But everyone, even John Watt, was fully conscious that the big boss was there.

Watt checked the time. It was twenty-eight minutes past one. Sixteen minutes since the 999 call came through and already they had a senior officer on the scene of the crime, a double ring of road blocks surrounding the area, and the remainder of his Task Force crews stood by waiting for instructions to scour the area that was ringed round. The van was more than likely still inside the area. Watt knew that it could be found. The three men would do their damndest to get out of the area. Watt was determined that they would be found. Sergeant Jackson was already handing out photostat copies of descriptions of the thieves. All that was needed for John Watt to speed the crews on their way were a few appropriate words of encouragement but he didn't forget to caution them as well. They were all young, likely some of them had never come up against a gunman before.

'Have you ever faced a gunman?' Hawkins asked Evans.

Evans shook his head.

'Never'

They were cruising along the streets of a nearby town, keeping a sharp look-out along the side turnings for the light blue van with J & R Stevens on the side. When they came across the vehicle it wasn't in any careful place of concealment but parked boldly on the main street, there must have been any number of people saw it stop there, saw the three men get out and walk away. Hawkins looked about for a likely witness. There was a newspaper and tobacconist's shop hard by with a counter open to the street, the shopkeeper was already staring across at where Hawkins and Evans were examining the abandoned vehicle. Hawkins went over to him.

'Did you see that van being parked?'

'Why, mister?'

Hawkins answered him patiently, though it must have been obvious from Evans's uniform. 'We're police officers. You are Mr... ?'

The shopkeeper pointed to the sign above the door. 'J. Lane Licensed to sell.'

Hawkins began again, 'Mr Lane, did you see that van being parked?'

'Yes'

'When?'

'About a quarter of an hour ago'

'Did you see the men who left it?'

'Yes'

Hawkins took a deep breath Christ, it was like coaxing water from a bunged-up tap drip, drip, drip

'Who left it?'

'Three lads'

'Did you see where they went?'

'One of them came here Bought a paper Young lad in dungarees'

'Where did he go?'

'Stood by the pavement over there'

He's not over there now, thought Hawkins, so come on Mr Lane

Mr Lane pondered a moment and then volunteered the information, with the air of a conjurer producing a rabbit from a hat, 'Then he took a bus'

Hawkins's jaw lifted a couple of inches 'Which bus?'

'Single decker from the other side of the road Eastern National one of the coast buses'

'The other two men as well?'

Lane shook his head 'I just saw this one lad going for the bus'

Another one of the Task Force cars had arrived The crew got out and joined Evans by the abandoned van one uniformed crime patrol driver, two detective constables, and Policewoman Betty Donald Evans pointed out to them where Hawkins was questioning the newsagent Miss Donald came over to ask, 'Anything I can do, sir?'

A bright girl, this one, Hawkins was beginning to realize She was going to be worth having in the Task Force Of the three detective constables who'd just arrived, the two men and the girl, she was the one who'd taken the initiative

'One of our three lads bought a paper from this fellow and then got on a bus,' he told her 'I'm going to check its route and get it followed You go on talking to Mr Lane See if he remembers what happened to the other two'

Hawkins went over to the parked cars Detective Constable Betty Donald turned to Mr Lane with a bright smile that made her look more than ever like a schoolgirl playing at being a policewoman Lane stared back at her without enthusiasm He'd had enough of the cops and robbers game, it was interfering with his trade

'You say one of them came and bought a paper' Lane
 nodded 'But three of them got out of the van'

'Yes'

'You saw three of them get out of the van'

'I've said all this Look miss, I'm losing business'

'It's important, Mr Lane I'll help you' She began to reconstruct
 a picture which might awake his memory 'The van is over there
 You see three men get out One comes over You sell him a paper
 You can still see what's going on behind him'

The newsagent looked at her, completely blank

'You're talking to me now,' she pointed out, 'looking at me
 But you can still see what's happening behind me'

'That's right' He was beginning to get interested, discovering a
 savour in the man-hunt game Donald coaxed him on a bit more

'You see three men One comes over to you Buys a paper You
 can still see the other two Did they walk off towards the corner?
 Go the other way?'

Lane was trying now, but the memory was still eluding him
 'I think they stood by the van'

Donald suddenly recalled a detail in the report of the hold-up
 The money had been taken away in a brown leather brief-case It
 was hardly likely that the man who bought the paper would be
 carrying it, more likely it was one of the others Of course, they
 might have ditched it by then, but it was worth trying 'The two
 men by the van one of them had a brown leather brief-case'

And Lane had got it like a picture coming into focus the
 two tough looking young men one with a brief-case under his
 arm waiting while their mate bought the newspaper and
 then 'They crossed the road The other one stood over this
 side at the edge of the pavement and watched them'

'Watched them walking away?'

'No They were at the bus stop Then the coach came They
 were on the other side of it so I couldn't see them The one with
 the paper runs across to it When the coach pulled out they'd all
 three gone'

'Thank you, Mr Lane'

She hurried across to Hawkins in the crime patrol car where
 he was taking down final details of a radio message giving the route
 taken by the single-decker bus and the times of its arrival at the
 various stops

'They're all three of them on it,' she told him

'How do you know?'

'Mr Lane remembered'

He gave her a hard look He was only too familiar with witnesses
 'remembering' details in response to over-enthusiastic question-
 ing 'You were leading him?'

'Asking the right questions'

He was still not satisfied. Maybe Miss Donald was a bit too keen, a bit too eager, seeking the neat answers in preference to the messy ones. He turned to the Welshman at the wheel of the car. 'What do you think, Sergeant? All three of them on the bus, or only one?'

Sergeant Evans tapped his nose with a thick forefinger. 'This says all three.'

'Why?'

'They wouldn't ditch the van opposite the bus stop just to let one get away.'

Hawkins's mind was made up. He opened the back door of the car for Miss Donald to get in, and beckoned Detective Constable Timms over to make a fourth. There was already one Task Force car with a crew of two chasing after the coach. That would make two cars and six officers, with an armed man and a bus-load of passengers, any more would only get in the way. He called Control Room to tell them of his decision. 'T Foxtrot One to X-Ray.'

Reid answered him, 'Go ahead Foxtrot One.'

'The three men may be on the coach heading for the coast. We have the route and times. I shall catch it up in about ten minutes. If it's not stopped at the road blocks first.'

Watt was in the Control Room, keeping an eye on the progress of the pursuit as marked from minute to minute on the big wall map. His ear caught the significance of Hawkins's message. A coach-load of people with an armed man on board being stopped at a road block! It wasn't on. Supposing the fellow lost his head and started shooting. 'Inspector Reid,' he called sharply.

Tell the road blocks to let the coach pass *without* inspection. And I'll have a word. He leaned over Reid's desk to speak into the microphone. 'Superintendent Watt to Hawkins.'

Hawkins's car was already speeding along in pursuit of the coach. He grinned at Evans as Watt's voice was heard. stood to reason that John Watt wouldn't go back to his office and get on with the desk work while his Task Force were on their first important operation. 'Hawkins here, sir,' he reported.

Watt's voice came back at him, crisp and demanding. 'Do you intend to board the coach?'

Hawkins hedged the question. 'If the suspects leave the coach there will be no need to board it.'

'And if they don't leave the coach.'

Hawkins wasn't prepared to answer that. Superintendent Watt knew that these things had to be played by ear. 'Sir,' we have two crime cars and six officers. That should be enough to play it whichever way was needed.

He waited for Watt to come back at him again, but there was no answer. John Watt didn't need reminding how far it was wise to exercise control, and at what point to leave it to the man on the spot.

The car came up to the inner ring road block—a white traffic vehicle and a motor-cycle cop on the hard shoulder—a police marker and a uniformed man at the centre point of the road. Hawkins stopped for a report from the uniformed man. The coach had been allowed through a few minutes earlier without being checked, several passengers on it, mostly middle-aged women, three young men as well, one of whom stood up to take a look at the police checkpoint as the coach went through. And not far behind the coach and ahead of Hawkins was the other Task Force car.

Evans made haste to catch up with it. Which two were its crew, then? Clifford and Gibson? Good lads, both of them. But they'd need a bit more weight to deal with the three tearaways. Evans comfortably settled his own weight more firmly into the driving seat as he pushed the accelerator down hard.

Hawkins was studying the coach route and the list of stopping places. 'There's a quiet stretch of road just beyond Linton, and a bus stop in the middle of it.'

Evans glanced at the map. 'Just about six miles from where we are now.'

Hawkins looked at the time-table. 'The coach is due there at 2.10.'

'We could overtake, and be there first,' Evans pointed out.

'Yes. And it's quiet.'

Donald leaned forward from the back seat. 'Sir—are you going to board the coach?'

Hawkins didn't even look at her. 'Yes.'

'Do I come with you, sir?'

'No.'

'If he's armed, he may be nervy. A man and a woman boarding together.'

Hawkins turned to her. 'Evans and I will board the coach. DC Timms will take over the car. And you will stay with him.'

Timms nodded his understanding. Betty Donald stayed silent for a moment and then returned to the attack. 'Sir—if one of you was accompanied by a woman—the tilt of her chin was as determined as Hawkins's at his most pugnacious. 'Sir—I'm volunteering.'

Hawkins made no answer. What was the world coming to when a Detective Constable, and a Woman Detective Constable at that, told an Inspector how to run an op. Mind you, she wasn't entirely wrong.

His thought was interrupted by a message coming over the car radio, relayed from the other Task Force vehicle just behind the coach a party of schoolchildren had got on the coach at the last stop That put the mockers on it Nobody in his right mind would try to take the three villains with a pack of chattering schoolkids all round them The question was, who would get off the coach first? the schoolkids or the hold-up men? Or would they all get off together, with the gunman using the kids as cover? Be a right bastard situation, that would

Barlow was equally unhappy about the situation which he heard reported over the monitor speaker in Watt's office A gunman in among a pack of kids! 'What are your feelings?' he asked Watt

'About the lad with the gun?' Watt carefully shifted the angle of a framed photograph that stood on his desk 'He'd use it as a frightener to keep anyone off'

'No more than that'

Watt shrugged 'You can't tell'

'And you're leaving it to Hawkins?'

The old beggar was really fidgety, it was understandable He was two steps away from the action this time, not even in a position to influence it from a distance, as Watt was, maybe if he'd been Task Force commander he'd have been chasing along the bus route himself in pursuit of the coach, his face glowing with the excitement of it But that wasn't Watt's way 'Harry's got my say-so to travel on the coach, or stop it To wait until they leave, or pull them off He has two cars and six officers. And he's on the spot'

Barlow stared back at him, expressionless

'It was you that mentioned trust,' Watt pointed out 'Wanting to show that it works'

Charlie Barlow forced a smile of agreement to his lips His eyes weren't smiling Neither were John Watt's I hope to God that Harry does pull it off, he was thinking

Hawkins's car was now only half a mile behind the coach He had to choose either to carry on at the same speed and overtake it, or ease off and wait for the turn of events They passed a bus stop where a pack of schoolchildren were scattering off in different directions like a handful of marbles thrown on the ground He leaned forward to turn up the volume of the radio as the message came through relayed from the other Task Force car all the children had now left the coach Apart from the three suspects there were only four other passengers on board He turned the volume down again and leaned back in his seat, casual, relaxed 'We will now overtake and board the coach at the next stop'

Donald leaned forward and thrust her head between his and

Evans's Hawkins looked upwards at Heaven and not at her as he gave his consent 'All right, you can come aboard with me'

Evans had already taken off his flat cap and was wrenching at his regulation tie 'Who else, sir? . . . to help you?'

'It isn't a riot, Sergeant Evans Just one lad with a gun'

'As you say, sir'

'This is how we'll tackle it' Hawkins looked round at the other three in the car as he gave them precise instructions Betty Donald to board the coach with him at the next stop, Evans and Timms to push on ahead to the stop after where they would board the coach in their turn, one behind the other and not together, so that Evans could pay his fare first and then pick a position near to Hawkins and near to the gunman, while Timms would take advantage of the 'pay-as-you-enter' system as an excuse to stay by the driver and keep the bus on an even course If it came to a struggle there'd be nothing more dangerous than a bus swaying all over the road or coming to a sudden halt

'We are going to take them on the bus, then?' Evans asked Hawkins

'Yes but quietly'

They were all four of them silent now as they drew level with the other Task Force car and overtook it The coach was only a few hundred yards ahead, occasionally lost to sight around a bend of the country road Evans pushed up to the tail of it just fast enough to be able to overtake, but not so fast as to arouse the suspicions of the three villains on board it The car, like the other Task Force vehicles, bore no police markings, and with Evans on the side away from the coach having his shirt open at the neck, and the other three in their civilian clothing, it looked like any ordinary car-load They slid past the coach and pulled ahead, keeping a look-out for the next bus stop Donald saw it first, low down on a telegraph pole, as they drew up to it the car stopped for only a fraction of a minute to allow Hawkins and Miss Donald to nip out smartly, then it was off again As the Task Force car vanished round the next bend ahead, the coach appeared around the bend in the other direction It pulled up in response to Hawkins's request signal, and he and Donald climbed on board

Donald waited while Hawkins paid the fares They could have been any young couple off for an afternoon's shopping in town Hawkins took the girl's elbow and nudged her along the gangway, past the four women, sitting gossiping in pairs, and towards where three young men were sitting at the back Three very ordinary young men They weren't even together One of them was on his own, nearer to the middle of the bus, staring out of the window at the green fields alongside The other two were sitting together further back, the one on the gangway with his knees

wedged against the seat in front, reading a paperback. Three very ordinary young men. But the descriptions matched those given of the three raiders, and the fair-haired lad reading the paperback was the one who had been reported as carrying the gun.

Hawkins took his time following Donald along the gangway and past the two men. When the inevitable jolt came as the coach rounded a corner, Hawkins allowed it to swing him off balance against the fair-haired lad. 'I'm sorry,' he said, as he guided Donald into the seat behind the two lads and sat beside her. The young fellow had barely looked up from his paperback when Hawkins apologized for bumping against him; Hawkins leaned over the back of the seat and repeated the apology. 'I said I was sorry.'

The young fellow looked up this time but his answer was abrupt. 'Right.'

'What time do we get to the terminus . . . do you know?' Hawkins asked him.

'Two forty-five.' He went on with reading his paperback.

Hawkins settled back comfortably beside Donald. Her look at him was a plain question, and his nod was an obvious answer. The lad was carrying a gun. Time enough to think about stopping him from pulling it when Evans got on.

They were approaching the next stop where Evans and Timms stood waiting. Evans now wearing a zipped-up waterproof coat in place of his uniform jacket. The coach stopped and the doors hissed open. Evans climbed the steps, paid his fare, and ambled along the gangway, hands in pockets. A couple of paces away from the fair-haired lad he just stopped, and stood, and looked amiably into his face, until the young lad, aware of the scrutiny and tensing up under it, pushed back in his seat, closed his book, and made as if to put it away in an inside pocket. Hawkins knew that where he was reaching for was where he was carrying the gun; he stood up and reached over the lad's shoulders to grab his wrists and lift both arms above his head. Evans tut-tutted as he grabbed the revolver that was already showing at the lad's waistband, and dodged the kick aimed at him as he stepped back. A woman sitting on the opposite side of the bus looked round as Evans cannoned against the edge of her seat. 'Don't worry, lady,' he told her. 'We're the police.' She returned to her gossiping, completely reassured by his tranquil tone, while he moved in again to help Hawkins in taking the two young men off the bus. Donald reached over to the seat they'd just been taken out of, and retrieved the brown leather brief-case that was left there.

The third young man, sitting alone nearer the front, and hearing the scuffling behind him, rose to his feet and walked casually away towards the doors. DC Timms was there, waiting for him.

The two of them got off together, followed by Evans and Hawkins with the other two villains followed by Donald with the brief-case stuffed with the stolen money. As she got off the bus, Donald turned to the driver and impishly said, 'Ding-ding!'

He gaped at her

'It's all over,' she explained 'You can drive on'

Watt stood in front of the big wall map in the Control Room as Inspector Reid supervised the shifting of the markers the roadblocks being taken off two Task Force cars on their way to Haynham Police Station with the thieves apprehended and the money recovered the rest of the Task Force vehicles at wherever they'd checked in when the man-hunt was called off A neat piece of work that, and it was still only Watt looked up at the clock 14 22 By heck, the day hadn't even half begun yet Charlie Barlow ought to be well satisfied with what had been achieved by John Watt's Task Force, first time out But would he be? Never on your life! 'Don't slacken off, John!' That was Barlow

A uniformed sergeant reached up to the board to take down the marker showing the original deployment for that afternoon the exercise at Greybourne on the tail of the sneaky sneak-in thief 'Just a minute,' Watt said And he turned to Inspector Reid 'The Greybourne op was booked in until five It's not that yet'

Reid stared at him, what did Superintendent Watt want from his Task Force? blood?

'Well then?' Watt demanded

Reid flicked a series of switches on the control panel and pressed the microphone key X-Ray to all units of Number One Task Force originally on Greybourne assignment You will now proceed to Greybourne and carry out the operation for which you were briefed Your time of arrival at Greybourne should be 15 00 hours' He looked up at Watt who seemed to be smiling

'That's telling them,' said John Watt

The Hermit

(from the television script by Allan Prior)

JOHN WATT used to reckon that his partnership with Barlow was like a music-hall act, like the really good 'uns who used to amaze him when he saw them on the Halls, they could talk to each other without words, see each other with their backs turned Timing was part of the secret of course, timing, and understanding, and trust.

'Right, John? . Right, Charlie' . Alley-ooop!' Only it wasn't 'John' and 'Charlie', it was 'John' and 'Sir' Comedy man and feed, top balancer and support, in police parlance 'hard man, soft man.' Charlie Barlow was always the boss and John Watt was the Number Two

Sometimes when John Watt said this to Jean, she'd smile indulgently, shake her head, and tell him 'no'. In her opinion the partnership was more like that between a pair of concert performers, with Barlow as the virtuoso and Watt as the accompanist And as she pointed out to him, virtuosos are so plentiful that you can't walk up Wigmore Street without tripping over them, but the really good accompanist is a rare bird indeed And her John, in his field, was the best of the lot

However that might have been, the fact was that whenever they worked together as a duo it was Barlow who took the lead and Watt who supported him Even when he didn't want to even when he didn't agree on principle he couldn't help himself And it wasn't only police discipline that made him tag along so obediently, it was a recognition of where the responsibility rested, for the failures as well as the successes Like the American President once said about passing the buck 'It stops right here'

There were times when Barlow had exercised that responsibility in a way that Watt would never have done Never in a million years! Like taking risks with ordinary folk for the sake of nabbing a few villains 'We've got to catch them at it, John' But catching them at it couldn't be done without baiting the trap, and it wasn't goats or bits of cheese used as bait, it was people There was one time they'd laid a trap catching a gang 'on the knock' it was for a really wicked lot, preying on old people, lonely people, defenceless people John Watt hated their guts But he doubted that he hated them enough to go for them in the way that Barlow had done His way would have been simpler, more thorough, and safer He'd have packed the little seaside town where they were working with a copper on every corner nearly, which wouldn't have been so difficult seeing how small the place was where was it now? He looked at the big wall map of the Thamesford area, running his eye along the coast-line until he came to it Gravely! that was the place Very aptly named . because it was chock-full of old folk, retired folk taking a last look round from the edge of the grave The sort of folk who were easy meat for the knocking gang like the old girl who gave them their first clear lead spinster lady He found the 'Gravely Knockers' file and looked up the statement taken from the old girl a Miss Dobson She'd been nearly in tears that night when she opened the door of her bungalow to John Watt and Policewoman Betty Donald Miss Donald had calmed her down, sat her in a

chintz covered chair, made her a cup of tea, and then coaxed her into telling what had happened. It seemed that earlier that day she'd had a visit from two men, proper official they'd looked, one with his peaked cap and his tool-bag, the other with his clipboard and his card which she hadn't seen too clearly because of her eyes, but which she was sure had something stamped on it that looked like 'Gas Board'. There was a gas leak in the street, they'd told her, if she didn't mind them looking in her bungalow for it. And while the well-spoken one with the clipboard checked the meter, the other went wandering round the house, checking the appliances, she could hear him in different rooms knocking at pipes. It hadn't taken long, they were in and out so fast that she thought to herself how it wasn't true that workmen today were deliberately slow on the job. And they hadn't left a scrap of mess anywhere. It was only later that evening that she discovered they hadn't left much of her valuables either.

'I went into the bedroom to switch the electric fire on,' she explained to Watt, 'I always switch it on half an hour before. And I thought to myself, there's something wrong in this room. What is it?'

Remembering that first moment of shock, she seemed about to break down again. Watt didn't say anything, just leaned forward, elbows on knees, and smiled at her encouragingly. She took a deep sighing breath and continued:

'I couldn't think for a minute what it might be. And then I saw, my jewel box was missing, with all the things I have of any value. Not very good, you know, but sentimental.' She choked on the words again, when she went on, her voice was bleak, despairing. 'I just sat and looked around, and then I thought "my clock"! It belonged to my grandmother, you know. My father left it to me in his will. "The other girls got married," he used to say to me, "so you get the clock".'

Watt followed her glance to the mantelshelf where there was a gaping empty space at the centre, ay, she'd keep it there she would, pride of place, where the villains would have spotted its value as soon as they walked in. Likely it would be quite a rare piece, Miss Dobson herself was in her seventies; her grandmother could have acquired the clock anything from one hundred to a hundred and fifty years back, and it might have been a rare old piece even then. But even if it wasn't, it was rare to Miss Dobson; it was little things like that that kept these old people anchored to what happiness they'd known in the past, and gave them the courage to survive the aches and woes of the present. And these light-fingered bastards had walked in and taken it from her. If he, John Watt, ever laid hands on them.

Miss Dobson was trembling as she appealed to Betty Donald, 'It

doesn't seem possible to think people would come into my house and do that' Her whimpering was like that of a child that has been hurt and doesn't understand why Watt felt a choked anger at his own inability to do or say anything that would comfort the old lady He got up and went, leaving Miss Donald to apply her feminine sympathy as best she could

It was after coming away from Miss Dobson that Watt made up his mind to crack the 'Gravely Knockers' He'd need to move fast though, and in some strength, to get them before they moved on, for the usual pattern with these knocking mobs was to move into an area and go through it like a dose of salts It would need a really big operation, with detectives on the streets, anonymous cars cruising about, even fellows with binoculars at vantage points, and Watt would make sure that each one of them knew damn well what he was looking for

Watt could see the knockers in his mind's eye the two look-outs arriving first, positioning themselves either end of a street of houses which were going to be done, the car creeping in a few minutes later bringing the two Gas Board men, or the Borough Surveyors, or whatever they were pretending to be, the series of brief stops along the street at houses previously scouted out and marked on their cards as 'good touches', the swift sallies to the car with bulging holdalls of stolen goods, the nervous twitches of the lookout men ready to wave their newspapers or blow their noses or give whatever signal they'd fixed on to warn the car driver that it was time to make a get-away A pattern which was plain enough to anyone watching, but it needed a lot of eyes in a lot of well thought out places of concealment

That was what Task Force was for, though just this sort of operation And while he was about it, John Watt couldn't see why he shouldn't have the loan of Number Two Task Force as well, brought in from the other side of the river It was worth it to get these knocking bastards He went to put the suggestion to Barlow, leading up to it tactfully like, putting the boss in the picture first on the pattern of recent knocking operations as they'd been affecting the Thamesford area

'Decimal Currency Board's the latest,' he told Barlow, it then being the run-up period to the currency change-over

Barlow was interested, it was a new one on him 'What do they do? Knock on the door with two ha'pennies for a penny?'

'Something like that Offer to explain it all, take away the old currency, and give half the value in exchange'

Barlow shook his head in admiration 'Clever Only temporary though What are the more regular wheezes?'

'Posing as Gas Board men health visitors Any excuse to get

in the house Wave a bit of official looking paper, or a card with a bit of printing on, and it's "Come on in",

'People never learn' Barlow seemed to be blaming the victims as much as the villains Watt defended them vigorously 'These are old people easily intimidated'

'Stop waving that thing about, John You're making a draught'

'That thing' was the large scale street map of Gravely-on-Sea, on which Watt had marked the current rash of knockings He presented it to Barlow together with the lists of property stolen

Barlow studied it a moment 'It's a lot of stuff bulky' He was beginning to be interested, turning his mind to the larger mechanics of the knocking jobs 'They've got to have a clearing house somewhere, John They've got to get rid, and fast And this won't be the only team Oh no There'll be two or three teams Four, maybe'

John Watt liked this line of reasoning; if the boss got to thinking it was so big he'd likely say yes to Watt having command of both Task Forces in putting a stop to it 'My feelings exactly, sir It's big and we're not doing enough'

Barlow was following the line of reasoning to a logical conclusion 'Getting rid means getting it out of Thamesford Into a fast car with it and up the M2 to London After that, anywhere in these Islands Overseas maybe France, Belgium The States if it's good enough, eventually'

Watt had already worked out this possibility, but he didn't want it pushing just then, the way that Barlow was carrying on, they'd soon be handing the whole thing over to Interpol, whereas he, John Watt, knew for a dead cert that the place to tackle it was at the source, right there under their noses at Gravely-on-Sea He edged the map forward and brought Barlow back to the immediate present 'Sir, I reckon they've very nearly done Gravely They'll move on soon'

'Who are they, John? Any descriptions?'

'Of a sort One fellow biggish, thick-set, sometimes wears glasses, sometimes not, sometimes a tash, sometimes not; sometimes a hat, sometimes not He's Number One Number Two is smaller, darker; none of them remember much about him'

Barlow knew the type 'Sneak-thief'

'Right'

'Tried the mug book?'

'No good'

'Why not?'

Watt explained 'They're all old people who've been knocked Bad eyes Bad witnesses.'

Barlow smiled, he was beginning to get up John Watt's nose; he seemed to be admiring the villains, enjoying their cleverness

'Ay They'd pick their people They'd be very careful who they pick'

Watt made it quite clear that he harboured no such admiration for the thieves 'They'd pick their victims both ways. Defenceless people Old people Frightened people' He slammed the palm of his hand down on the list of stolen property 'I hate these bastards'

'I gathered that, John' Really worked up about it, was John Watt Barlow asked him impishly, 'How is it relevant though?'

This was it the moment for John Watt to lead in to his request 'I'm taking my lads down there Swamp the town . ' Barlow spun the map round to take a better look at Gravely-on-Sea, it was hardly more than one main street and a shingle beach; 'swamp the town'? Two buckets of water'd do that But it wasn't two buckets of water that John Watt was after He took a deep breath and virtually demanded of Barlow, 'I want some assistance from Number Two Task Force as well'

Barlow looked at him incredulously 'Both Task Forces? for Gravely-on-Sea? You don't need it, John' And before Watt could put forward any good reason to alter this opinion, Barlow said firmly, 'Besides, Number Two Task Force is flat out at the moment on that hi-jacking'

Watt knew all about the hi-jacking 'They've just about cleared that up'

'No they haven't And if you want another reason ' Barlow searched for it and came back to the obvious one 'You don't need more than your own Task Force in a little place like Gravely It would make every second fellow in the High Street a copper. You'd scare your vultures off'

John Watt smothered his anger . . better play it cool. 'You know who you remind me of nowadays, sir? Remember Mr Gilbert at Wyvern? . how he always said "no"? You both do it very nicely, I'd say'

Barlow just grunted, and slid the map back across the desk Watt was sure, for a pound to a penny, that Charlie Barlow had no idea what Gravely was really like, had never been there for more than a brief visit to the local nick, never studied the maze of side streets with their rows and rows of houses, each with just two or maybe only one old person living in it 'Why don't you come down there and see for yourself what the problem is,' he proposed

Barlow gave a very good impression of seriously considering the suggestion. 'I might, John. I might.' But he wasn't fooling John Watt. Watt put the pressure on. 'Tomorrow then, sir? I'll have my control set up by then.'

'I'll see I'll see'

'I'd appreciate it'

'Well'

'I'll expect you, sir, unless you let me know otherwise'

Barlow began to prepare his get-out 'John about coming down tomorrow

Watt picked up the map 'Good I'll see you there'

Barlow gave up, it was no good chopping words with John in this mood, but if he thought that he'd out-manceuvred Charlie Barlow into promising to give up his valuable time he'd better think again. Getting above himself was John. Needed a bit of reminding 'When are you off to Gravelly, John?'

'Now as soon as I can'

'You'd better make it sooner than that. They might move on. They might have moved on already.'

But the knockers hadn't moved on. There were still pickings for them in Gravelly, as Watt discovered that afternoon when two more knocking cases were reported, both in the same street, both making use of the same Gas Board dodge to gain entry to the houses, and both reported to Watt's temporary control within ten minutes of the villains having departed. Ten minutes start wasn't much, but it was enough. The villains were away before the Number One Task Force could close all the gaps and carry out an effective search. John Watt swore, if only there'd been more men on the ground, he'd have had them. Could do still if he was given Number Two Task Force as well.

But then he thought, gloomily, that maybe it was too late. Maybe these two latest cases were the last two. He and the other detectives of his Task Force had been on the watch all day for any doubtful looking characters. He'd made a particular point of keeping a check at the main post office, it was pensions day, and he wanted to know if anyone was taking an undue interest in the old folk coming in and out. The knockers would be looking for indications. . . like anyone drawing out a couple of months' back pension in one go . . . or paying it straight into a Savings Account. A quick look over the shoulder at the address on the book, and they'd have one more for their list of those worth following up. But there hadn't been anyone obviously hanging about when Watt called in at the post office to check with Miss Donald.

'Seen anything?' he asked her.

'No sir,' John Watt wished that she wouldn't call him "sir" in public; it was a dead give-away, and she had been told more than once. He leaned against the counter, chatting to her, the picture of a devoted husband sorting out with his wife the rest of the afternoon's shopping, but what he actually asked her in a low voice was, 'Nobody hanging about any longer than need be?'

'Only me' He took in her woeful look and asked sympathetically, 'Feet killing you?'

'They are a bit'

He looked at the time on the wall clock and decided that he could spare a few minutes keeping up observation in the post office while Miss Donald took a break 'Get a cuppa at the café next door,' he told her

Donald's pretty little face brightened. 'Thank you, sir,' she said delightedly

He glared at her, there she went 'surring' him again, and there were people almost near enough to overhear them The little fellow writing out a telegram glanced up curiously John Watt decided to throw some dust in his eyes 'See you later then, love' He beamed a doting farewell upon Miss Donald She took the hint, reached up and kissed him, and went pattering out to the street John Watt watched her go the cheeky little bit . . . kissing a Superintendent Whatever next? The little fellow grinned and went back to completing his telegram. When he'd finished it, he took it across to the counter where he joined in the queue at the head of which was an old man being infuriatingly slow about collecting his pension He looked a right old hermit, thought Watt weighing up the stocky figure in his once good but now shabby suit, long wispy grey hair shedding dandruff all over the collar, but there was a brightness in his eyes, and a defiant upward twist to the bushy moustache which made Watt chuckle a bit even as he felt sorry for the old man's air of neglect The old fellow took the money that was handed across to him, checked it note by note and coin by coin with a deliberation that brought a muttered 'tut-tutting' from the queue behind him, gave a courteous 'good afternoon' to the counter clerk, and tacked across to the shelf where he'd left his hat and his stick and his oil-cloth shopping bag and the few packages he'd picked up from the shops on his way to the post office When he'd got the lot disposed about him to his complete satisfaction, he stumped his way out of the post office, pausing at every third step not so much to draw breath, but to shift his limited concentration from the immediate project of propelling himself towards the door to the more general pursuit of taking in all the activity around him John Watt recalled a bit from his poetry learning at school the seven ages of man 'Last scene of all that ends this strange eventful history is second childishness and mere oblivion . . . ' This old fellow must have reached his last scene and there was certainly something childlike if not childish about him, but there was no 'mere oblivion' in his case The pace was much slower, but the life was still there Well, good for him

When the old man had gone, Watt turned his glance once more

upon the other customers in the post office Two tuppenny stamps and straight out again a licence form to fill up at the shelf. and the little fellow with the birdlike tilt to his head had apparently got his telegram sent and was now making a phone call It crossed Watt's mind that this fellow had now been in the post office for a bit longer than Watt himself, which was now a good four or five minutes But even as he wondered about it, the little fellow said 'good-bye', put down the phone, and walked briskly out of the post office

John Watt prepared himself to wait the extra few minutes for Donald's return by seeking something to occupy himself with rather than just hang about The wooden rack full of leaflets was near at hand, and filling in the form on one of them gave him something to do It was from these leaflets that he got the idea which he was to put into effect later that afternoon when he decided to shift his policy from seeking out the knockers to warning the old people against them By the following morning the printing department at Thamesford Constabulary Headquarters had run off enough leaflets to shove one through the letterbox of every house in Gravely-on-Sea There was one also landed on Mr Barlow's desk that same morning Within an hour he was storming into John Watt's temporary control room at Gravely

'You've done it now,' he growled at Watt

'Morning, sir Glad to see you Wasn't sure you were actually coming after our chat yesterday'

Barlow glared at him 'I'd no option, had I' He took the copy of the leaflet from his brief-case 'You've involved the public now, John, and because of that, you've involved me'

John Watt took care not to look too pleased with himself as he answered, 'Well, yes I have, haven't I, sir', he even succeeded in making it sound as though this thought had only just occurred to him

Barlow was nowhere near convinced He fluttered the leaflet in his hand and began to read from it "'To the Householder or Occupier If anybody has recently called on you saying they are from the Electricity Board or the Gas Board or the Coal Board; or if anyone has offered to give you an estimate for repairs to your house, or for any wallpapering, painting or plumbing work inside the house". la-de-dah and so on' He took a deep breath as he came to the bit which Watt had known would arouse his anger "'Please ring us at once dial 999 or contact your local station'" He finished his reading and slammed the leaflet down on a desk 'That's not bright, John Not very bright'

'No But it's safe though'

'Safe is right Safe for the villains They'll see these leaflets can't fail to. and that's the last we'll see of them'

Watt was vehement 'All right I can't protect every old age pensioner in this place I can't catch the knockers, not with the resources I have So I'm scaring 'em away'

'Capitulation'

'If you like'

Barlow was forced to take up the real issue of his refusal to supply Watt with extra resources It annoyed him to have to do so, he didn't like being put on the defensive 'This is not the only job on our books, John. And I wouldn't have given you the other Task Force to help clear it up anyway You know why?'

'I can guess Because you didn't think we could get these villains Thought it would be a waste of resources in men and work-hours'

'Damn right I did'

Watt shook his head regretfully 'You get more like Mr Austin Gilbert every day'

Barlow was shaken by this Was John Watt perhaps right? Was he, Charlie Barlow, becoming too much the desk-bound administrator and losing the feel of the on-the-ground copper? He attempted to justify his administrative decision 'Now look, John, you played safe with those leaflets, and I played safe with my Task Forces, because you and I know that the team working this trick are too well organized, and if we get 'em it's a fluke'

Watt interrupted, making his point with some force now that he'd got Barlow half backing down 'I wouldn't say we could only get 'em by a fluke I say that if I have both Task Forces on it we could get to the places that are done just that little bit faster, have an extra fella or an extra car at a certain spot'

'Ask me when they start up again'

'And get the same reply as I got before?'

'Not necessarily' and Barlow came out with a reaffirmation of the one thing that Watt had half feared he'd gone soft on 'John

I hate these knockers as much as you do' Barlow took his coat off and sat at the desk where he'd slammed down his copy of the leaflet with its request for anyone with a lead on the knockers to call the police, he pulled the telephone forward to within comfortable reach of his left hand, then he grinned at John Watt 'Even if you haven't got the other Task Force, you've got me'

It wasn't long before a 999 call did come through from a Mr James Partland Barlow and Watt went round to see him The front garden of his gaunt Edwardian house was overgrown, and the paintwork of doors and windows was blistered and cracked, but the house itself stood as solid and four-square as on the day it was built John Watt hammered the green dolphin knocker . . . nice bit of brass, he thought, if it was cleaned up He caught a side-

long glimpse of a dirty lace curtain twitching, and carefully avoided looking at it. If Mr Partland already had cause to be nervous it would only make things worse staring at him.

There was a rattle of nonmongery from behind the door and it opened just a fraction, Watt could see the heavy brass chain preventing it from opening more than that. A quavery voice called out, 'Who is it?'

'Mr Partland? It's the police. You called us. Can we come in?' Watt fished out his warrant card and poked it round the edge of the door. Mr Partland was evidently reassured by the official look of it, he slipped the chain and opened the door wide. Watt saw a stocky old fellow staring back at him with wideawake eyes and a bristly moustache. By heck, it was the old fellow from the post office. Watt hadn't thought, when he saw him then, that he'd have two spare pennies to rub together. But the big house and the visit from the knockers seemed to say otherwise.

Mr Partland showed them into the front room, Barlow going in first, sniffing it from the doorway, taking in every detail of the massive furniture thick with dust, the faded carpet, the heavy framed pictures, the over-sized china ornaments, all of which would have their value to the right buyer but weren't in the class that the knockers would be interested in. Take a furniture removal van to clear anything worthwhile in this place, not a sneak-thief with a holdall.

Watt followed in with the old man, getting him to sit down and take a breather before coming to the reasons for his 999 call. When he did tell them his story, it was clear without doubt, that he'd been visited by the knockers. Two men had come to his door the previous afternoon, a while after he'd got back from the post office, claiming to be Gas Board officials. The pattern of conning the old man had been the same as with Miss Dobson, one of the men, the one with spectacles and a clipboard, had kept Mr Partland busy, while the other, the spightly little chap with the tool kit, had busied himself round the house, checking the gas appliances. Mr Partland hadn't particularly wanted his gas appliances checked, but since they'd told him it was a free service, he'd let them get on with it. It was only when he came to read John Watt's warning leaflet tucked inside his letterbox the following morning that he began to worry about the Gas Board men's visit.

'Was nothing missing?' Barlow asked him. The old man shook his head. Barlow was puzzled. 'Where exactly in the house did these two men go?'

'The one with the glasses. I took him in the kitchen . . . he looked at my gas stove. The other came in here mending the gas fire.'

'Is something wrong with it?'

'They said it was well, needed attention they'd call back, see

It was like an electric shock suddenly galvanizing Barlow and Watt, bringing a salt taste to their tongues, a tingling of the fingertips the feeling of the hunter sighting his quarry The knockers were coming back 'When?' asked Watt

'Tomorrow afternoon'

'They said that? Definitely? Tomorrow?'

The old man nodded Barlow looked round the room at the massive, almost immovable contents 'What would you think they're coming back for, Mr Partland?'

The old man muttered, 'Well I don't know I can't think really' and then said, very firmly, shaking his jowls, 'I wouldn't know'

'Can you remember then, Mr Partland which one first said they'd need to come back the one in the kitchen or the one in here?'

The old man tried hard to recall it, but it was no good 'No I can't it was all mixed up Well, I don't get many visitors I've lost the knack They've mostly gone our old friends I'm eighty-four'

Barlow looked at him with beaming admiration He nodded at a photograph on the sideboard 'And an old soldier, I see'

The only recognizable connection between the young man in first world war uniform on the photograph and the old man sitting across the room was the bristly moustaches Mr Partland heaved himself to his feet and picked up the photo frame 'A long time ago this, sir A long time I was in the East Kent Regiment at Ypres, you know Wounded there'

He put the photograph down again Barlow said to him casually, 'Of course, these gas board fellows will be coming back'

The old man's eyes closed, and he sucked hard through clenched jaws John Watt helped him sit down, he'd have a dicky heart, likely Barlow got out the half-silver brandy flask that always nestled in his hip pocket and coaxed Mr Partland into taking a sip It made the old man cough and splutter, but after a good trumpeting nose blow, he seemed to recover the brightness of eye that Watt had first noticed in the post office Even the moustaches seemed to be bristling up again Barlow smiled at him reassuringly 'When they do come back, we'll be waiting for them'

The smile of relief on the old man's face lit it up like a beacon Barlow was positively jovial now 'Like the old East Kents, eh?'

In Mr Partland's ear the distant trumpets of war sounded again He nodded vigorously Barlow leaned forward to ask him, confidentially, 'Of course, you do have something of value It won't be in the kitchen, so it must be in here'

Watt stared at him bottled coffee? When did Barlow ever drink that stuff? The old beggar wanted Partland out of the room, wanted to set up something with John Watt which he, John Watt, had no intention of agreeing with. The old man toddled off. As soon as he'd gone, Watt rounded on Barlow. He knew what the old beggar was leading up to and didn't like it one bit. Barlow was setting out to coax Mr Partland into something that he'd no right to expect of anyone, let alone a feeble old man. He only got as far as saying, 'Sir, I don't think we should' and Barlow immediately countered with, 'What do you suggest then?'

'Leave a few of our fellows inside the house tomorrow afternoon. Then we nab them as soon as they call.'

'And just get the villains on the knocker? the front men? We want them all, don't we? And we've agreed that there's more than this one team there's the pick-up men the clearing-house men the organizer.'

'How do we get them?' Watt demanded.

'The more we nick, all along the line, the more chance we have of finding a grass to put the finger on the rest.'

'I still say how do we go about it?'

'I think you know, John.'

John Watt did know. He'd known all along since Barlow started sweet-talking the old man. If they got Mr Partland to co-operate, there'd be a very good chance of nabbing the villains, not on the way in, with little evidence against them, but on the way out, carrying the loot. Maybe meeting up with others of the gang, it could be a pretty big haul. But why should Mr Partland be involved? 'He's a pretty old man, you know, sir. I'm not sure that we should ask him to do anything.'

'He'd be in no danger. We'd have enough of our lads inside, just in case.'

'Even so. He'd feel he was in danger.'

'Then he only has to say no. It's his privilege.'

'I don't think he should be asked.'

'He'll be protected, John. You know that.'

Watt did know it, he also knew that by nabbing these thieves they'd be protecting a lot of other old people. Barlow reminded him of his 'You want these fellows. You're the one that's been crying about them.'

'All right! All right!' Watt was annoyed with Barlow; and annoyed with himself for having set Barlow on the course that had brought them to this. But the old man might still refuse.

Mr Partland came in, carrying the two mugs of coffee carefully, one in each hand. 'I've put sugar in both. I hope that's all right.'

'Fine, sir. Thank you.' Watt took his mug of coffee and sipped it. Barlow took his and put it on the table. It was remarkable how

the old man's hands were as steady as needs be when holding the mugs of coffee, yet as soon as he let go they were once more all of a-tremble. Barlow took the old fellow by the arm and sat him down in a chair, bringing his own chair up very close to him. 'Mr Partland, I think you are going to be able to help us.'

The old man was startled. 'Help you?'

'You'd like to see these men caught and put away?'

'I would . . . oh yes . . . yes, I would.'

Barlow leaned in closer to Partland, two men of determination agreeing together. 'We can guarantee that they will be caught. But first of all we need somebody prepared to take them on . . . let them in, behave as if nothing has happened . . .'

Partland stared back at him for a long time . . . it wasn't sinking in . . . then, as the realization of Barlow's suggestion came upon him he started, violently. 'Oh! I couldn't. These men . . . they're young . . . strong . . . I don't think I could . . .'

Watt stepped in to back him up in his refusal. 'No need to do it if you don't want to, sir.'

The old man turned to him, thankful for his support. 'Well, I'd rather not. No . . . I don't think I could, d'you see?'

Over his head, Barlow and Watt were locked eyeball to eyeball, fighting a battle of wills. John Watt's look plainly said, 'Drop it now. You've given it a try and it hasn't come off.' Barlow's look said equally plainly, 'It's my decision, not yours. And I haven't damn near started trying yet.' He went to the sideboard and picked up the photograph of Mr Partland in his First World War uniform. 'I would have said you could do it, Mr Partland. I would certainly have said you could.'

For a moment no one spoke. Barlow seemed to be giving up. 'Of course, if you'd rather not . . . there it is then.'

Watt chipped in quickly, 'We'll be in touch,' and opened the door, meaning to get Barlow out there and then Barlow put down the photograph and went to the door, his drooping shoulders eloquent of disappointment in Mr Partland's valour.

'Mr . . . ' Barlow spun round on Partland, smiling broadly, the old devil had picked up a win, as usual, in the last minute. 'Yes, Mr Partland?' he asked.

Partland fluffed up his moustaches with a spiky forefinger. 'Just tell me, mister . . . what do I do?'

John Watt put PC Snow in charge of the detail assigned to ensure the protection of Mr Partland while the villains were with him inside the house. Six PCs were stationed in the back garden, two more were concealed at each side of the house, while Snow and another PC tucked themselves away on the landing at the top of the stairs.

'I'll be able to hear every word, sir,' he assured Mr Partland 'And I'll have Inky here with me' He tugged at the dog's lead, and the big black Alsatian lifted his head to look at Mr Partland with reassuring alertness 'If there's any trouble, Inky'll be down those stairs faster than I will And you just keep absolutely still, if I do let him go'

'Yes'

'Don't move'

'No'

'And don't you worry, eh?' Snow patted him on the shoulder Mr Partland wished that this big man would not speak to him like a backward child He was frightened, his quiet world had suddenly become a roaring whirlpool, but he knew what it was all about He looked at his uniformed photograph sadly In those days he'd have tackled these thieving scoundrels on his own

Snow looked through the window curtains It was all quiet outside 'We'll get out of the way then You'll be all right, Mr Partland Just you do like Mr Watt said'

Watt and Barlow were across the road keeping watch on Partland's front door from the upstairs window of a nearby house Watt scanned the length of the street through his binoculars 'All quiet, as they say'

'Shouldn't be for long'

'If they're coming'

'They'd be sure to come if you hadn't given out those leaflets,'

Barlow pointed out

Watt countered with, 'If I hadn't sent those leaflets out we wouldn't be here'

Barlow conceded the point

'Besides' Watt went on, 'I'm not all that happy about this about old Partland, for one thing'

Barlow sighed, he'd thought this particular argument had been settled 'Look, John I didn't do it without thinking about it That's why I'm here myself Anyway, he'll be all right Old soldiers never die'

'Old is right'

Barlow thought to dispel the gloom by going over the details of the plan which he already had off by heart 'Tell me the dispositions again, John'

'A circle of vehicles half-a-mile round, waiting radio call from us Patrol cars, Q-cars, the lot'

'Including Task Force Number Two'

'That and all,' said John Watt, though he doubted whether he would have had the support of the other Task Force if Barlow himself hadn't become involved It was a pretty formidable set-up,

now 'We shall look a bit silly if the knockers don't arrive' He scanned the street once more through the glasses 'She makes a lovely mum,' he murmured, passing the binoculars to Barlow

Barlow looked through them towards the street corner A pretty young woman was tittuping along, expertly pushing a high pram with the hood up It was Policewoman Betty Donald Barlow was still grinning at the sight of her when he suddenly said, 'Eh up, John'

Watt looked over his shoulder At the corner of the street a fellow in a dirty mac had stopped to do his shoe-lace up, raising his foot on the coping of a garden wall, taking a long hard look as he did so at Betty Donald's retreating back

'Look-out number one,' said Barlow 'And number two at the opposite end of the street, John Both in position'

Watt took the binoculars for a closer inspection of the two look-out men The one with the loose shoe-lace was now leaning against the coping of the garden wall, lighting a cigarette Under his arm he held a folded newspaper The man at the other end of the street had a newspaper under his arm, folded in exactly the same way It was more or less how Watt had imagined the villains would be working The next thing they would see would be the all-clear signal for the knockers' car to enter the street 'They'll be on their way, sir' Barlow nodded

The man lighting the cigarette straightened up and walked to the kerb, flipping his folded newspaper against his leg as he did so A big estate car rounded the corner and slid into the street, edging its way along until it stopped at the front gate of Mr Partland's house The driver stayed at the wheel of the car while two men got out and smartly walked up to Partland's front door where one of them beat a brisk rat-tat on the dolphin knocker The 'knocker' was a thick-set man with pebble glasses, carrying a clip-board under his arm, the other, the one carrying the tool-bag, was a neat bird-like man John Watt swore as he recognized the little fellow who'd been writing out his telegram in the post office two days before; if he, John Watt, had been a bit quicker off the mark he'd have got his mitts on the fellow then, on the other hand, it was better that he hadn't, since it would only have served to warn the villains off

The two fellows were fidgeting a bit on the doorstep, waiting for Partland to open the door Watt wondered if the old fellow was all right Inside the house, Snow was getting a bit worried, too He peered through the banister at the old man standing stock still in the hallway What was the matter? had he lost the nerve to go through with it? The door knocker crashed once again Mr Partland squared his shoulders, thrust his chin forward, and went to the door Snow held his breath, and put a soothing hand on

Inky's muzzle Partland turned the latch and opened the door, leaving it on the chain. The pair of pebble glasses squinted through the crack in the door. 'Good afternoon, sir. Gas Board again. Aren't you going to let us in?'

'Yes. . . oh yes,' Partland slipped the chain with a trembling hand and held the door wide open. The little fellow with the tool-bag slipped in at once. 'I better get at that wonky fire of yours, guv, we got one or two more calls.' He went straight to the door of the front room and slipped inside. Partland was about to follow him. The other man grabbed his arm. 'Mister Partland. . . there won't be a charge, but I'm afraid I will have to take down one or two particulars. In the back room perhaps? He'll be hammering and banging in the front.'

The old man nodded and led the way along the hall into the back room. Snow edged forward to where he could look down on the hallway, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound from front room or back. He slipped Inky's lead and just held him by the scruff of the neck, a half second could make all the difference if it came to any real bother. A sudden hammering from the front room got Inky straining forward, Snow held on to him and whispered a calming word. The hammering, which was probably only a blind to kid the old man that something was actually being done to his gas fire, stopped as suddenly as it had begun, in the silence that followed Snow could make out the faint clicks of tools being used, then after a moment the rustle of tissue paper. In less than a minute the front room door opened and the little man came into the hallway carrying a holdall at the neck of which Snow could see a foam of tissue paper with a glint of silver nestling among it. The little man ran light-footed along the hall, out of the front door and down the garden path. Through the doorway of the front room Snow could just see the open sideboard with the metal grille swinging wide and some of the remaining silver in front of it. He had to admire the speed and efficiency of the knockers. No wonder they'd been getting away with murder.

The little man ran back into the hall and went into the front room, closing the door, once again there was the rustling of tissue paper from inside. Snow started back at a scraping of chairs from the back room. The door opened and Partland came toddling out, the man in pebble glasses edging round him in the hall to get to the front room first, pitching his voice up to warn the other villain they were on their way. 'I hope he's finished in there John?'

The front room door opened and the little man came out. 'You'll find that gas fire okay now, sir. Light it all you like.' Over his shoulder Snow could just see that the empty sideboard was

closed up again. The two villains slipped through the front door and down the path to where their car waited for them. Partland closed the door and leaned against it. Snow hurried down the stairs to him. 'You did wonderful, sir. Wonderful.' The old man looked up at him. His chin was trembling, and a faint gobble of spittle trickled from the corner of his mouth. Snow pressed the button of his walkie-talkie radio and spoke to Superintendent Watt across the road. 'All clear this side, sir.'

The villains' car was already half way along the street. Watt had no need to do any more than give the word 'go' to his waiting Task Forces. As the estate car turned out of the street and on to the main road, the two look-out men began briskly walking away, satisfied that their part of the job was done. The first of them rounded the corner, walked slap-bang into a waiting patrol car, and was bundled into the back seat, the other look-out walked past Betty Donald with barely a glance into the pram she was pushing, if he'd looked in a bit more carefully he'd have seen the radio on which she had just received her instructions. She plucked the radio out from under the hood and then calmly pushed the pram down the slope of the pavement after the retreating look-out man. It hit him squarely in the back, and sent him tumbling over into the kerb. A second patrol car arrived a second before he hit the ground, and he too was swiftly whisked away.

The knockers were speeding along the main road in the estate car, unaware that their look-outs had been arrested, or that a florist's van and a mini-car were taking turns in tailing them. Barlow and Watt were both certain that somewhere nearby a pick-up vehicle would be waiting to take the loot from them and cart it away elsewhere. The aim was to let this vehicle load up first and go on its way under continuing observation before arresting the three in the car, that way they could hope to get more and more of the villains into the net all the way along the line. John Watt assured himself that this part of the operation was going ahead as planned, then he and Barlow went across the road to thank Mr Partland.

But Watt's very well-laid plans were already going astray, the trailing vehicles, faced with the choice of dropping too far behind or coming up too close, chose the latter course and found themselves too hard on the heels of the estate car when it turned into an alley where a pick-up van was waiting for them just as Watt had anticipated. The villains were in no doubts that the florist's van which followed them in at one end of the alley, and the mini-car which suddenly appeared to block the other end of the alley, were the same two vehicles that had been playing leap-frog with them on the main road, and were therefore police vehicles, like-

wise that the half dozen brawny looking fellows leaping from the back of the florist's van were not selling flowers. The knockers abandoned car, van and loot, and made a run for it. The fact that they were caught was only partial consolation to Watt and Barlow who had hoped to get a bigger bag, maybe including the organizer as well. But six arrests wasn't bad, and there was always the chance that one of the six might talk.

Barlow was looking around the front room of Partland's house for further evidence which he could use to put the pressure on the villains who had been arrested. Under the sideboard he found a loose candle-holder fallen off one of the candelabra. He picked it up carefully by the edges. You never know, the little fellow might have left a print on it. He was holding it up to the light from the window when Watt came in fast. 'Sir, it's the old man. He's collapsed.'

Barlow stared at him. 'What?'

'The excitement probably, Strained his heart. We're getting an ambulance. Just in case.'

Barlow pushed past him and went out to the hall where old Mr Partland was seated on the stairs, held up by Snow, who was loosening his collar and shirt. The old man, seeing Barlow, thrust his chin forward and nodded several times. Barlow stood there a long while just smiling back at him. John Watt watched them from the doorway. He wouldn't have done this to the old man never. Not in a million years. But maybe Barlow was right. The old man was eighty-four and even if he did snuff it, he'd have gone out in a blaze of glory. Watt stood aside as Barlow nodded once more at the old man and went back into the front room. He didn't go back in with him. Just closed the door on Barlow, standing by the window, looking out at who-knew-what. There were times when what you had to do just made you want to spit, John Watt knew that this, for Barlow, was one of those times, he also knew that he'd want to be left alone to do his own spitting. Well, knowing things like that is what a partnership is about.

Escort

(from the television script by Elwyn Jones)

JOHN WATT began to take a fresh interest in churches on the day that he married Jean Morrow. It was a practical interest then, focused on the simple need of getting to the church in time. It was after they were married that he discovered, among her many enthusiasms, a love of what was old and rare and lasting which

evidenced itself in a passion for visiting the less spectacular but very ancient parish churches of the Thamesford countryside. Sitting beside her in the car, and listening to her prattling on about the history and the architecture of these minor ecclesiastical monuments, Watt had become something of an authority on them himself

Which gave him the edge on Barlow when the pair of them were called into the Chief Constable's office one morning Cullen looked up at them as they stood just inside the door 'The Heavenly Twins,' he commented It still amused him that these two men, so different in temperament as well as appearance, were nevertheless unmistakably the products of the same school of experience

Watt's eye was on the big map in the transparent cover that Cullen had laid on his desk and marked up with coloured pencils He didn't need to see the map reference to know which area it was, it was one that he and Jean had covered several times in their parish church peregrinations, and the particular church that Cullen had marked with a cross, though not especially distinguished, was a favourite of Jean's 'Oldcote Parish Church,' he murmured 'Bits of it Norman The timbered roof of the nave is fourteenth century'

'You're observant,' Mr Cullen commented 'And knowledgeable'

John Watt explained, 'Marriage is very educational, sir Jean's an authority on architecture, too'

'As you are on security'

'That's true' He glanced at the cross on the map 'But they've got nothing much that needs securing There's an altar-piece dating from'

Barlow interrupted before he could launch into the full guide-book account 'Just tell us, sir . . ' he said to Cullen, 'why are we interested?'

Cullen told them 'On March 12th, one week from today, Oldcote Parish Church is to have a visitor of some distinction Senator William S Alderton from Lewisville, USA. A tame genealogist has discovered that one of his ancestors is buried inside the church The Senator has provided money to have the burial plaque restored On Thursday he comes to lay a wreath there'

Watt glanced at Barlow; so they were going to be visited by an American Senator So what? as the Senator might say It surely wasn't for Head of CID and Head of Number One Task Force to bother with 'It's a Divisional matter sir, surely?' he suggested to Cullen. 'A couple of bobbies at the gates Maybe a detective hanging about.'

Cullen shook his head 'That won't be enough The Senator has

received three anonymous letters Somebody's threatening to kill him'

Barlow and Watt were silent, threats against prominent persons were commonplace, most times nothing came of them, but just once in a while 'We take it seriously, do we sir?' Barlow asked

'I don't think we've any option, Charles'

'Today week' Barlow rubbed his chin 'It's a rush job'

'It's a Task Force job,' Watt reminded him

Barlow agreed 'You do the route and the site, John I'll do the background' He brought Cullen back into it 'What do we know, sir? And who's our contact?'

The contact was a Mr O'Hara who held an unspecified post at the American Embassy He arrived ten minutes before the time of his appointment with Mr Cullen, one of those eternally youthful, neat-suited, plain-shirted, trim-haired Americans who so often show up on Presidential newsreels looking the opposite way to everyone else

'You were early,' Cullen growled at him

'I try to be, sir'

Cullen liked the 'sir' It made up in part for the unseemly haste which meant starting the meeting before there was time to go through the morning's correspondence There would have to be time for the morning pot of tea, though, which arrived as Barlow came in to join them He was equally charmed by the 'sir' which O'Hara accorded him, something to be said for these diplomatic Yanks, they were hot on the old-fashioned courtesies What about the Senator, though? William S Alderton of Lewisville, USA? Was he as diplomatic as Mr O'Hara? If so then why the threatening letters? O'Hara described the Senator, 'he is important All United States Senators are But he's not specially controversial, not pivotal, not even conspicuous.'

That made him sound like a half-asleep Parliamentary backbencher and who'd bother to shoot one of those? There had to be more to it Barlow pressed O'Hara for the more and got it

'We have a fair number of Senators who are what you would call ultra-conservative Senator Alderton is not quite that extreme'

'But ...'

'He hates ... and I'm using his words ... he hates nigger-lovers'

So what did that make the Senator in American terms, Barlow wondered A reasoned racist? At any rate, it apparently gave someone else the reason for threatening to poop him off And maybe brought them one step nearer to discovering who that someone might be

O'Hara produced the letters which contained the threats, three of them, neatly enclosed in transparent envelopes to prevent the fingerprints from getting smeared, each bearing the same

message 'Come to Oldcote and you'll get killed' There were only two envelopes for the three letters, the first to arrive having been thrown away before the import of its contents was realized The two envelopes that had been kept both bore Thamesford postmarks And a rough set of fingerprints had been made up from the several pieces of correspondence

'I'll get them checked through right away,' said Barlow 'See if it's someone on record in Thamesford'

'Thank you.' O'Hara handed them over 'They meant nothing to Metro'

Metro? . . . isn't that what the Yanks call the Underground? He'd mean the Met . . . the Yard If meladdo's fingerprints weren't on Central Criminal Records there'd not be much hope of their being on Thamesford's files What other leads were there? the typewritten address?

O'Hara informed them that the machine used was an Imperial Good Companion Portable Probably 1966-67 Lots of those about But the address itself, as Barlow had surmised, was a key factor

'It's what makes us take this relatively seriously,' O'Hara confirmed 'A straight crank, we think, would have sent messages via the Embassy But our suspect knew in advance, or took the trouble to find out, which hotel the Senator would be staying at'

O'Hara was right, it began to add up to a serious threat 'What's the Senator's reaction?' Barlow asked

'Contempt,' he was told 'The Senator's a bit of a fire-eater It's not the first time he's been threatened'

'By whom?'

'Again I use his words . . . ' O'Hara enunciated them precisely, 'by nigger-lovers, by long-haired pansy communists'

Cullen exchanged a look with Barlow, definitely a fire-eater, and therefore probably not easily intimidated 'So he won't cancel his visit?'

'Not a chance' O'Hara was rueful 'He told me "We go ahead as planned"'

Cullen shook his head 'Not quite He'll go ahead as *we* plan'

O'Hara seemed to doubt this 'The Senator can be ornery'

Barlow looked down to hide his grin, O'Hara would find out what ornery really meant if he gainsaid Mr Cullen There was no objection to this Yankee CIA man, if that's what he was, lending assistance in protecting the Senator, but Cullen and Cullen alone, as he made plain to O'Hara, took the responsibility and decided on the method O'Hara accepted this And the three of them turned their attention to the details of the Senator's visit

Watt was doing his own checking of the Senator's itinerary,

pacing it out yard by yard and minute by minute from the moment of arrival to the moment of departure, with the aid of Sergeant Jackson, suitably equipped with stopwatch, map, and time-table. They'd started at Kingley Station where the Senator would arrive in a reserved first class compartment with two escorting officers from Thamesford Constabulary in reserved compartments on either side. A word with the railway authorities had ensured that the compartment selected would be stopping at the centre of the platform where Mr Cullen would be waiting to welcome the Senator. From there to the station exit and the parked cars would only be a short walk, adequately covered by the Railway Police, with a few of the Task Force to lend extra eyes.

So far, so good. The cavalcade or motorcade, as the Yanks more accurately called it, would travel direct from the station to the church at a steady pace, along a route cleared for it by traffic police. No stopping, so there should be no problems there, though Watt made sure of anticipating any problems that might arise by having Jackson drive him along the route at a careful crawl, taking note of any junctions, intersections and roundabouts that might cause a worrying hold-up. There were no underpasses, so that was one worry less, though in any case, this was the quiet English countryside, and not Dallas, Texas.

The church was situated in one of the quietest parts of the Thamesford countryside, an angular and not too beautiful structure that was nevertheless mellowed by age and softened by the surrounding bosage of elm and beech and yew-hedge. Jackson halted the car by the lych-gate and got his stopwatch at the ready. On the word from Watt they both alighted from the car together, and crossed to the gate. Anyone watching them might have been excused for doubting their sanity, for there they solemnly came to a halt, shook hands with no one, and waited for the arrival of a non-existent escorting party before they filed through the gate and proceeded up the church path.

'Not too fast,' Watt admonished Jackson, who was stepping it out like the smart young copper he was. 'This is supposed to be a bit ceremonial.'

They continued in more stately fashion to the porch where Jackson clicked the stopwatch key and announced that the walk had taken nineteen seconds. Down went the timing on the itinerary sheet, as Inspector Hawkins, who was already there to prepare the Reverend Rowley for this visit, opened the church door for them.

The Reverend Rowley seemed somewhat astonished by this upsurge of constabulary interest in his church; Watt was glad to be able to show that on his part, at least, it was not wholly professional. 'It's the font that intrigues me,' he told Rowley. 'Doesn't

get much emphasis in your guidebook But it is thirteenth century, isn't it?'

Rowley, who loved his church nearly as much as he loved his vocation, was charmed by this enlightened interest He turned away to point out the details of the font with eager enthusiasm 'The octagonal form would indicate thirteenth century, but there is an inscription on this side that wouldn't support ' He stopped suddenly, being reminded by the purpose of the visit that Watt was only a policeman 'How on earth would you know ' He stopped again, and had the grace to apologize 'I withdraw that I meant that I would not have expected any but the dedicated few to know about the font '

Watt modestly accepted the compliment 'Hidden depths, sir I'm full of them And now if you don't mind ' he briskly returned to the purpose of the visit, 'Will you go through the motions please, Padre '

Rowley seemed bewildered Hawkins gently took him by the arm and reminded him, 'You know, sir the rehearsal We've just entered '

'Set the watch,' Watt ordered Jackson did so Harry Hawkins turned to Rowley 'Now I'm the Senator Start from where you take me up the aisle The organ's playing '

Watt and Jackson, standing side by side, began a combined oompah and a humming that might have been 'Onward Christian Soldiers', or might have been two other tunes entirely as Hawkins and Rowley walked in solemn tread along the aisle, Rowley with hands clasped on prayer book before him, Hawkins with hands clasped behind his back, as a model of a US Senator looking every inch the British policeman

When they reached the front row of pews, Hawkins stopped and sat down, while the Reverend Mr Rowley went forward to the altar and did a little bob in front of it that might have been a genuflection or could have been a suppressed hiccup There was nothing very High about Mr Rowley's Church

He turned to the observing police officers and told them, 'This is where I say the prayer Do you want it all?'

Jackson stopped the watch Hawkins reiterated his request that Mr Rowley should rehearse every detail of the ceremony 'You said it would be a brief prayer,' he reminded him Watt offered himself a little bet on what Mr Rowley considered brief

Rowley qualified his promise of brevity 'I said it would be simple '

'All the same, Vicar,' Hawkins was firm, 'whatever you mean to do on the day, please do it now '

Rowley took a deep breath and fixed his eye on the highest point of the vaulted roof Jackson re-started the stopwatch Rowley

began to speak. We meet to do honour to those who begat us. We in this Parish are glad and proud to welcome our distinguished visitor from the United States. In welcoming him, we acknowledge our own forefathers. So "Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us".

Not a bad choice of text, thought Watt. Appropriate. A bit clawly perhaps. Senator William S. Alderton wasn't all that famous. But he was rich. And Oldcote Parish Church, as he knew from Jean, was badly in need of funds for its restoration and upkeep. If a few soft words from the Reverend Rowley could coax from the Senator a whacking contribution towards that restoration, then God bless Mr Rowley for it.

Mr Rowley's voice soared to the vaulted roof as he continued, "The Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning. Such as did bear rule in their Kingdoms, men renowned for their power, giving counsel by their understanding, and declaring prophecies such as found out musical tunes, and recited verses in writing. Rich men furnished with ability, living peaceably in their habitations. All these were honoured in their generations, and were the glory of their times. The forefathers of William S. Alderton are so remembered today."

That seemed to be it. Hawkins half rose from his seat. Jackson prepared to stop the watch. Watt reckoned he'd about break even on the bet he'd made with himself. But the Reverend Mr George Rowley was not yet finished. He lowered his gaze from the vaulted roof and looked Hawkins firmly in the eye. "But before I ask the Senator to proceed," Hawkins sank back on the hard pew, "let us also remember the others. "And some there be, which have no memorial, who are perished as though they had never been, and are become as though they had never been born, and their children after them. But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.""

Watt was impressed. Good for Mr Rowley! He wasn't all guff and soft soap then. Didn't mind hitting out at the high and mighty and reminding them that they were of no more account than the many whose names were long since faded from the tombstones. Watt turned to Jackson and asked, "How long was that?"

Jackson, who had stopped the watch as Rowley finished speaking, announced the timing of the prayer as one minute, forty-nine point eight seconds. That wasn't too long-winded, considering.

They continued with the rehearsing of the ceremony, the next item of which was the singing of Hymn Number 215 Ancient and Modern. Jackson looked doubtful when asked if he could give an immediate rendering of it, so the timing of that was left until an appeal could be made for a rendering from Sergeant Evans's Welsh Baptist repertoire.

'And then ?' asked Watt

'I accompany the Senator to the plaque' Rowley took Hawkins's arm and led him to the memorial tablet set in the wall 'The Senator lays his floral tribute There is a moment of silent prayer And then the Senator will speak'

'For how long, sir?'

'Who knows?'

Watt told Jackson, 'We'll find out from the Senator I'll bet he's got hand-out copies all ready Go on, M1 Rowley'

The Reverend Mr Rowley, with the aid of stand-in Senator Hawkins, completed the rehearsal of the ceremony returning Hawkins to the seat in the pew and taking himself to the front of the altar where he said Benediction, before joining forces again with Hawkins for a progression through the body of the church to the main doors where it was intended that they should make their exit and then double round the back to the vestry

'What for?' asked Watt

'For the signing of the visitors' book'

'I mean, why round the outside, and not straight into the vestry?'

'I thought it would be more properly formal'

Watt hesitated a moment He'd have to be tactful in putting this to Rowley since he could hardly come straight out with saying that doubling round the back of the church was like giving an open invitation to a gunman 'Would it bother you very much' he put it to Rowley, 'would it upset ceremony, or doctrine, or whatever, if you took the Senator straight to the vestry?'

'No'

Watt told Hawkins, 'Then we'll likely do that' Hawkins agreed

But Rowley was by no means content to have his plans changed without even being given a reasonable explanation 'Why is that necessary?' he demanded And the best reason that Watt could think of was that it might be raining It said little for Rowley's belief in the power of prayer that he should even consider the possibility of bad weather ruining his great day, nevertheless, he did give it serious consideration And Hawkins's sneaky suggestion that a little extra time in the vestry could be put to some purpose in discussing with the Senator the financial needs of the church, persuaded Mr Rowley to cut out the long walk round

Watt soon established that the vestry itself was reasonably secure, with only one other door giving on to the road where the cars could come round and pick up the departing entourage Rowley's bewilderment at this detailed interest in the preparations for the ceremony rose to the surface again Watt left Hawkins with Jackson to conclude the timing from the vestry to the cars, and took Rowley back into the church to explain to him 'You've

a right to be puzzled, sir And you've a right to the apology I'm about to offer you'

'What for?'

'For us using next Thursday's visit as an exercise in protecting important people against crowds, cranks, demonstrators Straight crowd control, we get enough practise with But looking after VIPs well, not enough of them come here to give us a chance to learn So we want to use your Senator as a sort of guinea-pig'

'That means using me too'

'That's what I was apologizing about You see, for an exercise, this is almost a perfect training ground'

'It's a church'

'Sorry I meant the Senator's visit It's half-formal, half-personal It's not designed to last long so it's strictly time-tabled We want to cover it Bring him here, take him away, all with maximum efficiency and minimum inconvenience'

'And that's all?' Rowley was too intelligent to be completely taken in by John Watt's elaborate explanation But it wouldn't do to tell him of the assassination threat How else to convince him? Watt had a crafty idea The Reverend Mr Rowley was as proudly English as the church he served 'It's a bit of a show-off too, really,' Watt told him 'We want to show the Yanks we can do it better than they can' And Mr Rowley was quite happy to give his consent to this manifestation of the sin of national pride

Thamesford Constabulary was buffing, sprucing, polishing all for the impending escort duty laid on for the protection of Senator William S Alderton of Lewisville, USA Sergeant Evans was detailed off to accompany John Watt to London, in order to make the return journey on the Senatorial train The fat sergeant's sartorial sloppiness was noted throughout the Force Watt decided to have a discreet word with him The last time Evans had been known to go to London was to see Wales playing in the Rugby International, likely he went up for that in a sports jacket with a leek in the buttonhole, which would make a very strange impression on the Senator 'I'd like you in a sober suit, Sergeant Evans,' Watt told him

Evans grinned back at him 'My sincere suit, I call it, sir Very suitable for funerals' And realizing the implications of what he had said, he hastily added, 'and for more joyous occasions, of course'

Cullen, for his part, was making quite certain that the uniformed members of his Force should present their most noble spectacle, laying down in a Special Force Order that all personnel should wear best uniform, neatly pressed, and be ready to salute wherever and whenever appropriate with rigorous exactitude

The vehicles chosen for the motorcade were checked for mechanical perfection and polished until they reflected the drivers' faces—a white traffic car to lead the way, the Chief Constable's car to go immediately ahead of the mayoral limousine in which the Senator would be riding, and a Task Force car with two of the toughest and most alert Crime Patrol lads to bring up the rear.

Hawkins was doing his polishing-up on the firing range, cramming in some extra target practice with O'Hara. There was a marked contrast between the shooting styles of the American security man and the English copper. O'Hara whirled, drew, and fired in one swift, smooth action—but he missed the spring-up targets six times out of ten. Hawkins allowed each target to steady while he drew his gun and braced his legs at the correct angle to it, he then took careful aim with the gun held at arm's length in both hands, and fired. He scored hits on seven targets out of the ten.

O'Hara told Cullen when they reported back to the Chief Constable's office, 'You know, sir, this guy really is a shot. He beat me hollow.'

Cullen was pleased. It was a slightly more cheering finish to the conference he'd just been having with Barlow. The precautionary arrangements made were as foolproof as it was humanly possible to make them, but the problem was that they still did not know who or what they were taking precautions against. Barlow had only a string of nothings to report. 'Nothing from Fingerprints. Nothing from Special Branch. Nothing from our local inquiries. Nothing from the Air Force Police at the nearest US Base. Nothing, nobody, to latch on to. I don't know what I'm looking for. And that makes me a bit unhappy.'

Which meant that they were back on watching the crowd. And under these circumstances Cullen felt justified in taking the final decision on permitting Hawkins to be armed. O'Hara was glad of this. But none of the three Thamesford police officers liked it one bit, Hawkins least of all. Barlow told him, 'I knew one Chief Constable who used to say to the man with the gun, "If anybody shoots the Monarch I expect you to shoot the assassin".'

Cullen added coldly, 'My Chief used to do better than that. He used to say, "If you let anybody shoot the Monarch, you'd better shoot yourself".'

Hawkins wished they'd chosen someone else for the gun toting. But there wasn't a chance of that. As the 'on-the-ground' officer, and with his qualifications as a marksman, it was his responsibility. He went along to Oldcote Parish Church in advance of the arrival of the main party to make a final check that neither human assassin nor explosive device was previously concealed on or near the

premises The church was already a-clatter with the activities of a newsreel camera crew and a number of assorted choristers and church functionaries Hawkins took one look round and said loudly and firmly, 'All out, please'

The Reverend Mr Rowley came bustling over 'Do I hear you aught?'

Hawkins explained, 'It's a normal precaution I want the place completely cleared'

What for?

'So that we can look it over, just in case some joker's left a surprise packet Now a thorough search, please!'

The search team obediently entered the church in response to Hawkins's order two detective constables, Policewoman Detective Constable Betty Donald, Police Constable Dog Handler Henry Snow and Snow's black Alsatian, Inky

Rowley was appalled 'A dog in my church?'

Snow turned to the clerical gentleman His manner was meticulously polite, but there was no mistaking the implied reproof 'Inky goes to our Parish Church every Easter, sir, when the Reverend Smith holds his Service for Animals Does none of us harm to get blessed, does it, sir Though I take it that you're not an animal-lover'

'You shame me, officer' Rowley stepped back and Snow slipped Inky off the lead 'He is very well behaved, sir,' he assured Rowley 'Now seek, Inky'

Inky's search revealed nothing more alarming in the church than three mothballs and two rats, though the scent of old bones in the churchyard did get him sniffing around to such an extent that Snow thought it best to put him back in the van Not as if Inky was all that keen on seeing the Senator arrive just another pair of trouser legs as far as he was concerned

Senator Alderton turned out to be considerably less of a loud-mouthed bigot than either O'Hara's summing-up or the unknown assassin's antagonism had made him seem to be John Watt got a first sight of the Senator on the train entering the reserved compartment adjacent to the one already occupied by Watt himself A spruce man, dark-suited and bow-tied, with an intelligent and penetrating look about him which gave him more of the appearance of a television current affairs interviewer than of the sort of man who usually gets interviewed He was accompanied by a brisk young woman who was, according to O'Hara, a Miss Rose Latterby, the Senator's 'personal affairs secretary' John Watt had a sneaky suspicion that it might be a very personal affair that brought Miss Latterby to Europe with the Senator However that might have been, she was clearly a very efficient secretary During

the journey to Kingley, Watt caught glimpses and heard snatches of her coaching the Senator in the speech he was to make, and in the etiquette to be observed towards the rural gentry he would be meeting. As Watt stood by the compartment door, waiting for O'Hara to take him in and introduce him, he gathered that the Senator was having particular difficulty in remembering how to address the Reverend Mr Rowley and his Senior Churchwarden, Sir Edward George.

So it's two names,' he reminded himself, 'Rowley and George.'

'Not really,' Miss Latterby corrected him. 'You say "Mr Rowley" and "Sir Edward".'

'Just "Sir Edward"? I don't say the "George" part.'

She shook her head. 'You do not say the "George" part.'

O'Hara seized the opportunity of a momentary lull in the coaching to slide open the door of the compartment and effect introductions between the Senator and Miss Latterby on the one hand, and John Watt and Sergeant Evans on the other. The Senator looked up at Sergeant Evans in his 'sincere' suit, filling the compartment doorway. 'Do they all come as broad as you?'

'No, sir,' Evans turned to Superintendent Watt. 'The clever ones are always smaller.' John Watt looked particularly impressive in the crisply tailored suit which Jean Watt so thoroughly approved of, and the bowler hat which she loathed, but which is *de rigueur* for all senior plain-clothes police officers on formal occasions.

'I've one question, sir, please,' he asked. 'How long will your speech be?'

Miss Latterby answered, with an exactitude that immediately endeared her to John Watt, 'Two minutes and a half.'

'Thank you!' He smiled his approval. Then told the Senator, 'And one other thing. I've been asked like to offer you a bit of an apology, since you're going to find yourself a bit hemmed in.'

O'Hara hastily explained to the Senator, 'By British standards, the Superintendent means.'

John Watt queried, with bland innocence, 'What other standards are there?' before going on to amplify his apology. 'I mean, Senator, that we're going to be staying a bit close to you. A lot closer than we stay to most distinguished visitors. And we're likely to seem a bit conspicuous.'

The Senator was not displeased with this. 'So I get the full treatment, do I?'

O'Hara murmured in his ear, 'Fuller than they give their own Prime Minister.'

Just how full that treatment was, the Senator was already able to see for himself. The train had slowed down as it drew alongside

the platform at Kingley Station, then it gradually, with an almost imperceptible motion, slid along the last fifty yards until the Senator's compartment was exactly opposite the imposing uniformed figure of Chief Constable Cullen, there, at a nod from the stationmaster, it came to a halt. Cullen was flanked by two senior uniformed officers, while a uniformed inspector of the Railway Police with several of his men lined the path from the edge of the platform to the station exit.

The Senator stepped down from the train, introductions and handshakes followed with almost bewildering rapidity, civic dignitaries, laden with heraldic silver, took the Senator to their bosom, and in no time at all the motorcade was sweeping out of the forecourt at Kingley Station, its access to the main road cleared for it by Cullen's gauntleted traffic cops. Such constabulary hands as were not engaged in directing traffic flashed to the brims of helmets or peaked caps, to the huge delight of Miss Latterby who confided to the Senator that they look so cute when they salute.

Over crossroads and past intersections, by motorway and country lane, the motorcade kept pace to within seconds of the itinerary worked out by Watt and Jackson, arriving at Oldcote Parish Church not a moment before nor a moment after the anticipated time. And there at the lych gate began the full enactment of the ceremony previously rehearsed under Watt's direction, with the principals taking the parts that had been filled on that occasion by stand-ins and shadows. But there was one principal whose name on the cast list had not yet been filled in, and that was the would-be assassin.

In his awareness of this, John Watt made certain that he stayed close to the Senator's elbow from the moment the motorcade stopped, through the introductions to the Vicar and his Church dignitaries, along each step of the church path, across the porch and into the church, refusing to allow even the split second's delay that Miss Latterby tried to snatch for the taking of a flashlight photograph. Very tricky things were flash bulbs, at a time like this, that one moment of eye-blinding could easily result in someone slipping by who didn't ought to be there.

It was with a feeling of relief that Watt saw the Senator into the church to the triumphant if somewhat reedy laudation of the Oldcote Parish Church organ. Once inside the church, Barlow was in charge, with Hawkins close at hand ready for action. Watt waited just long enough for the Reverend Mr Rowley to begin his prayer with the words that he, John Watt, had already heard. 'We meet to do honour to those that begat us', then not particularly wanting to hear the whole of the address for a second time, Watt nodded to one of the junior churchwardens to close the door, while he remained in the porch outside. Provided that

everyone kept to the details of the ceremony as rehearsed and timed, there would be fifteen minutes before the Senator would emerge, fifteen minutes during which the Senator could expect to be as safe as any man had a right to be in God's house

Mr Rowley took only three seconds longer for the address than he had done at the rehearsal, the words were exactly the same, but there was a little more feeling in them when he came to the bit about praising not only the famous, but remembering those of humbler circumstance as well. Hawkins, recalling the penetrating look that Rowley had cast upon him at this point when he was standing in for the Senator, wondered if the Senator was now getting the full benefit of it himself. If he was, then the Senator was taking it with the same dignity that he'd so far manifested throughout his visit. Hawkins wished he were a little less dignified, it was not conducive to flinging yourself flat on the floor if some crazy gunman started pooping off. But what chance was there really of a crazy gunman being among this lot? Hawkins looked along the rows of pews as the congregation belted into the hymn that Bob Evans had so melodiously rendered at Task Force Headquarters on the completion of the timing of the ceremony.

'The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord,
She is his new creation
By water and the word,'

Every mouth lustily opened, eyes bent down on hymn books or upwards towards heaven, according to whether the singer knew the words or not, ladies in floral hats and gentlemen with old school ties, from Barlow's florid face at the front to Betty Donald's in the corner of the back row nearest the door. Surely among all those faces there was not one that remotely fitted the picture of an American political assassin. Hawkins felt reassured enough to look down for a moment at the book in his hand and snatch up the words of the next stanza of the hymn.

'From Heav'n he came and sought her
To be his holy Bride
With his own Blood he bought her,
And for her life he died '

But there was one face, which to Betty Donald at any rate, bore upon it the marks of a dedication that had nothing to do with praising famous men, the young man standing only a few feet away from her seemed ordinary enough, a plain shirt and tie showing under the collar of his raincoat, hair neatly trimmed but not so much so that it might have been done that morning to allay suspicion. There was something about him that reminded

her of that smooth-as-silk Mr O'Hara from the American Embassy, something professional, something . . . determined . . . that was it. Even as she watched he slid his hand into the inside pocket of his coat and just let it rest there. It might have been an absent-minded gesture, except that his eyes were too alert for any absent-mindedness. Could it be that he was another Embassy security man, planted there for the Senator's protection? But if so Mr Cullen would have been informed, Mr Barlow would have been informed, she would have been . . . 'Mr Barlow!' She turned her eyes to where Mr Barlow stood with his back to her, his head bobbing up and down slightly as he whole-heartedly joined in the singing of the hymn. There was only half a verse to go now, and she knew that at the end of that verse the Senator would be led to his ancestral plaque in the side wall of the church, in front of which he was going to lay the memorial wreath, and where he would be in the direct line of sight of the young man with his hand inside the pocket of his coat.

She stared with all her will at the two-inch nape of neck showing above the stiff white collar of Mr Barlow's shirt, gradually the slight bobbing of his head ceased as he stopped his singing and slowly half turned his head, letting his eyes flicker in advance of the head-turn to where Donald was staring at him. There was no need for her to do anything more than let her gaze slip sideways to where the young man stood; Barlow's eyes followed the look and what he saw satisfied him that there was reason to act and act swiftly. A slight nod of the head to Donald and she was already closing in on the young man, while Barlow himself moved lightly along the aisle, his first step alerting Hawkins who just eased his position slightly so that both hands and his line of vision were completely free.

The sudden movement of the three police officers was covered by the shuffling of the congregation as the singing of the hymn ended and the Reverend Mr Rowley came forward to conduct the Senator to the open space in front of the plaque. Donald had already positioned herself in front of the young man, covering his line of sight to the Senator. 'Are you all right, sir?' she asked him. 'I thought you looked unwell. There's more air outside.'

Her hand lighted on the arm that was inside his coat, spinning him round, and guiding him oh so gently towards the door. Any weight needed to keep him moving was provided by Mr Barlow following a few paces behind, beaming reassuringly upon the congregation, some of whom were showing signs of annoyance at the interruption. In a moment the three of them were through the door and out in the porch.

'Can I see what's in your pocket, please?' she demanded. And Barlow explained, 'We're police officers.'

The young man did not wait for any further explanations. He wrenched his arm free of the grasp so lightly laid upon it, kicked Barlow on the shin, smacked Betty Donald hard on the side of the head, and ran off through the churchyard with Barlow in pursuit. Out in the open Barlow momentarily lost sight of the young man among the elm-shadowed tombstones. He wrenched a walkie-talkie radio from his pocket and gave his instructions swiftly and clearly . . . all officers on immediate alert, PC Dog Handler Snow to report at once to the church porch with his dog. Then Barlow himself returned to the porch where Betty Donald was slumped against the wall, still half groggy from the thumping she had got.

He helped the girl to stand upright, as always not so much concerned as outraged that any of his officers should be assaulted while carrying out their duties. When Snow arrived with the dog on the lead he gave him a rapid description of the young man, pointed out the direction in which he'd fled, and added coldly, 'We want him.'

'Yes, sir,' Snow responded smartly, and murmured to Inky, 'Seek, boy. Go seek.'

'Watch it!' Donald cautioned, as Snow followed the dog, already pulling on the long, trailing lead. 'I think the young fellow's got a gun.'

Even if Snow heard the warning, there was little he could do to heed it. Where the dog led, he would have to follow, that was how the team trained, that was how the team worked, the dog's keen sense of smell allied to the man's intelligence. For this kind of searching, Inky was trained to pick out the most recent human scent upon the ground and follow it. The only human who had dodged between the rows of tombstones on that day was the young man in the raincoat, and Inky soon picked up his scent and zig-zagged after it towards a hut that stood beside a distant yew-hedge. As Snow and Inky broke from the cover of the tombstones they came upon the young man in the raincoat, wrenching open the door of the hut. In his right hand he held an automatic pistol.

From inside the church there drifted the sound of the organ playing a Handelian processional air. The service was over and the Senator was on his way to the safety of the vestry, completely unaware of how near he had walked to danger inside the church.

'Very smooth,' he complimented the Vicar. 'No hitches. And the service . . . homely but dignified. I liked that, Mr Rowley.'

Cullen and Hawkins looked on, concealing their anxieties, as the Senator signed the visitors' book. It was while the Senator was handing Mr Rowley a contribution to the church funds, with compliments and self-congratulations visibly swelling the chests of them both, that two shots were heard, distant but clear.

Hawkins's impulse to go to wherever it was that the shooting was taking place was checked by Cullen who ordered him to tend to his first priority and stay with the Senator. Cullen himself hurried through the church, where the congregation was a-buzz with mystified excitement, and came out upon the graveyard in front of the porch. Lumbering towards him, across the tombstones, was PC Snow, carrying in his arms the limp and blood-bespattered body of Inky. And for the one and only time in his police service, PC Snow was insolent to a senior officer, to a Chief Constable no less, as he pushed past him shouting, 'Out of the bloody way! I want a vet! The bastard shot Inky! I must get him to a vet!'

There was pandemonium by now, with the church congregation and some of the bystanders from the village street crowding in upon the scene, while the newsreel camera team hastily positioned themselves to record an event that was likely to be more exciting than the mere visit of an American Senator. Cullen quickly took control of the situation, giving orders for the churchyard to be cleared of all including the eager camera team, arranging for a cordon to be thrown so tightly round the area that the gunman could not possibly slip through it, then leaving it to Barlow to winkle the young man out of the hut where he'd taken refuge, while the Senator was whisked away to safety, closely escorted, as he had been on his arrival, by Cullen, Watt and Evans.

'If you're ready, Senator,' Watt firmly nudged him towards the vestry door outside which the mayoral car was waiting.

The Senator, who had been informed of the fact that the assassin had been spotted and had shot a police dog in his attempt to get away, looked a little sad. 'It's not the ending I'd hoped for,' he told John Watt. 'Not what I'd expected in a little old English church.' He shook his head sadly again, and went out to the car.

John Watt turned to Cullen and suggested to him, 'With your permission, sir, I'm having Hawkins take my place in the motorcade. I'll stay here.'

Chief Constable Cullen stared him down with the full weight of his massive personality. 'Permission denied, Mr Watt. Hawkins is our marksman. God help us, he may be needed here. You'll come with me and the Senator, as arranged. Now let's move.'

And so, Senator William S. Alderton of Lewisville, USA, departed from the resting place of his ancestors, where but for the alertness of one Policewoman Detective Constable Betty Donald he might have been laid to rest himself. The motorcade, making the return journey to Kingley Station, travelled rather faster than it had done in coming from there. Chief Constable Cullen was anxious to be back at the churchyard again, where the action was.

For a long while though, there was no action at all. Barlow's first choice was for a war of attrition, with everyone still, everyone

silent, and everyone alert, waiting for the gunman to make his first move. When Hawkins suggested going for the man at the risk of a shoot-out, Barlow refused to let him do so. Harry Hawkins was far more important than a police dog. He was still pondering on an alternative plan when the Reverend Mr Rowley came hurrying to fetch him. Miss Donald had identified a female accomplice of the young man in the raincoat, and was talking to her in the vestry.

Angela Grist was a plain girl with the devoted look of the born hanger-on. She'd been hanging on to Arnold Forrester since the two of them met some months before at the Agricultural College; they were both attending. Miss Grist was as English as Oldcote Parish Church, but Forrester was a Yank from Minnesota. Donald had established, among other things, that he knew the Senator well enough to name him to Angela as 'that Fascist crumb'. She handed her notebook to Barlow to fill him in on that and the other details she had coaxed from the girl, then stood back to watch Barlow wing from Miss Grist whatever other information would be valuable in enabling them to nab Arnold Forrester before he shot anyone else—or himself.

Miss Grist's already tear-stained face crumpled once again at this suggestion.

'Is he likely to do that—shoot himself?' Barlow demanded.

It only took her a moment's thought to agree that it was likely.

'So you'd best come and advise him not to.'

She shook her head.

'Why not? You're his friend, aren't you?'

Her voice was forlorn as she answered, 'No. I trail along after him, that's all.'

'But he allows you to? He asked you to come today?'

'No. I offered to come. I said I'd drive him. He has no English driving licence, you see.'

'You weren't next to him in the church?'

'No. I wasn't in the church at all. He told me to stay on the road. It's only when he didn't come out with the others, and when I heard a gun—'

Barlow's voice dropped to a gentle, coaxing murmur. 'You knew he had a gun?'

She denied it. Barlow's voice was still gentle as he told her, 'You're a liar.'

She admitted it now. 'I knew he had a gun.'

'You knew he was going to shoot the Senator?'

She denied it again. Barlow told her, as gently as before, 'You're lying again.'

It was hopeless trying to slide past his persistent questioning. 'I knew he was going to shoot the Senator.'

Barlow was brisk now 'So we'll arrest you for complicity'

'But I didn't do anything'

'Except bring him here Except be ready to take him away from here Otherwise you did nothing—nothing to prevent this happening' Barlow's venom was partly genuine he didn't like this drip who'd played a part in an attempted assassination for no other reason than her sloppy feelings for the assassin; it was partly assumed as well to break down her last shied of resistance

for she might hold the key to getting the gunman out of the hut without any more shooting

Betty Donald cottoned on to Barlow's intention and stepped in with a sympathetic, 'Are you going to help save your friend's life, Angela?'

'How?'

'Tell him to come out'

Miss Grist's face was even more woebegone as she admitted, 'He wouldn't listen to me'

Barlow whirled round 'Then stop wasting my time' And he was off, through the church and out to the porch where Hawkins was stood, looking out across the tombstones at the distant hut

'How near can we get to it?' Barlow asked, 'safely, I mean.'

Hawkins gauged the distance with his marksman's eye 'No nearer than this, if he's any kind of shot He's got a 38 or a 9 millimetre according to the bullets they took from Inky'

Barlow caught the tone in Hawkins's voice 'How is he?'

'He's dead'

They looked at each other a moment Then Barlow gave a little upwards jerk of his head. 'We've been hanging about long enough' He took the walkie-talkie radio from his pocket and gave his orders for the taking of Arnold Forrester CS gas ready; men and dogs ready, battering ram ready to break down the hut door, Inspector Hawkins ready to give covering fire But before that, Chief Superintendent Barlow was going to have a word himself with the gunman 'I'm going to talk to him,' his voice came over the walkie-talkie receivers positioned all round the hut. 'I'm going to talk to meladdo Now I think the worst he'll do is kill himself, or try to I want to avoid that I certainly want to avoid anybody else getting hurt So I don't want anybody going for the Queen's Medal Get that straight There are going to be no commendations for gallantry, bravery, or whatever in this operation We're just going to get this little squirt So nobody moves except under orders And that is an order'

Barlow slung the strap of the walkie-talkie set over his shoulder and took the loud hailer that Hawkins held ready for him 'I'm going to be a bit conspicuous now, Harry,' he grinned at Hawkins, '... so if you have to do any shooting—shoot him not me'

John Watt, returning to the church from the railway station, where the Senator had been seen off safely on his train, was astonished to hear Barlow's voice booming out over the tombstones 'Forrester! Forrester!' What was the idiot thinking of, standing out there in the open, trying to talk a crazy gunman into giving himself up? It was hard to say who was the crazier of the two. Barlow lifted the loud hailer again 'Arnold Forrester! We know who you are, you see. We've got you accomplice. We're going to get you.'

There was a flash and a whip-crack sound from the window of the hut and something whanged against a tombstone hard by Barlow. A young Task Force bobby standing near John Watt braced himself for a quick dash, but before he could get started, Barlow's voice came over the walkie-talkie receiver 'Nobody move!'

Once again his voice echoed from the loud hailer across the silent tombstones 'Forrester! Save one shot for yourself. It's time you had a go.'

Watt saw a thick-set uniformed figure hurtle past Barlow towards the hut. It was PC Snow, whose dog had been killed by that madman with a gun, ignoring the Boss's orders for everyone to stay back until the word was given, and having a go at the killer on his own 'He'll bloody kill the fellow,' was Watt's immediate worry, as he and everyone else swooped on the hut in response to Barlow's urgent command 'Move! . . . the lot of you!'

Snow thudded against the hut door, shoulder and hip and knee striking it simultaneously and breaking the flimsy lock. The young man in the raincoat whirled away from the window, but Snow was on him before he could take aim, bearing him to the ground, knocking the gun out of his hand, and then beating his head on the floor again and again with a silent intensity that was more frightening than any cries of rage.

It took the combined efforts of Jackson and Hawkins to pull him off while those others of the Task Force who'd reached the hut a moment later still struggled to get through the narrow door. It was Jackson who copped hold of Snow while Hawkins took Arnold Forrester away to the comparative safety of being under arrest. Barlow came into the hut with John Watt and with a jerk of the head ordered everyone else out. Jackson was still gamely holding on to the near berserk PC Snow. Barlow walked over to the distraught dog-handler and roughly asked him, 'Do you want to go on serving in this Force?' Snow looked at Barlow with the same uncomprehending look that Inky would have had if he'd been spoken to in this tone. Barlow rapped out, 'Then pay attention when I'm talking to you.' Jackson loosened his

hold Snow roughly shook himself free . took a deep breath
and came to attention That was a near do, John Watt felt;
we very nearly had to give the boot to a damn good copper
Barlow told Snow, 'You're a fool And as sentimental as I am '
And on one of the rare occasions when Charlie Barlow showed
any overt sign of having a heart, he added, 'I'm sorry about Inky '

EPILOGUE

IT WAS NEARLY DARK in the big room at the front of Kingley Hall John Watt looked for a light to switch on, but the desk lamp had been taken away with the rest of Barlow's furnishings, and there was only the big overhead chandelier He didn't want to switch that on, chandeliers were for celebrations, and while he was pleased enough about his own arrival as Head of CID he didn't feel like dancing a jig on Barlow's departure

He picked up the files taken from the cabinet and slipped them back one by one into their places When he'd done he couldn't bring himself to lock the cabinet again Opening it up in the first instance had been like stepping into a corridor that led backwards through time, where every step teased the mind with half remembered happenings that couldn't be buried again until they were properly filled in Happen he'd come back to it soon, at the moment there were other things to do He pushed the drawers fully home, giving the hardest shove to the top drawer chock-full to bursting with murder cases The key turned with difficulty, it was an old cabinet and stiff in its working He pocketed the key and went to the door of the empty room, next time he was to see it, it would be his room, fitted out the way he wanted it, it had taken him a while getting there, but by God, it had been worth it John Watt closed the door and strode along the corridor of Kingley Hall, he was the boss-man now

KNOCK, KNOCK! WHO'S THERE?

James Hadley Chase



*'Knock, Knock! Who's There?' is published
by Robert Hale & Company*

The Author

Born in London, James Hadley Chase was at first headed for a career in banking, but preferring freedom and the world of books, he started out selling Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*. He says that in two years he knocked on 100,000 doors. At the age of twenty he joined the biggest book wholesalers in Britain, kept his finger on the public pulse, worked out for himself what it was they wanted in fiction—and came up with *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (despite never having visited the U S A). Since then he has not looked back. He has more recently been described as the 'king of all thriller writers'.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DRIZZLING RAIN fell on Sammy the Black's sweating face as he shuffled along carrying the bag of money. He was a tall, gangling negro of around thirty years of age. With the muscular shoulders of a boxer and huge hands and feet, few would guess he had the spirit of a mouse. His large black eyes rolled fearfully as he walked, aware that he was carrying some sixty thousand dollars in the shabby hold-all and what was worse that everyone in the district knew it.

Every Friday, at exactly the same time, he did this long walk which took four hours. During those hours, he collected money from bars, news-stands and from the Numbers men. During this stop-start walk, Sammy sweated with fear, expecting at any moment some nut would shoot him down and grab the money.

For five hundred and twenty Fridays, he had done this walk and even after so many Fridays when nothing had happened, he couldn't shake the fear out of his system. He kept telling himself that if it wasn't this Friday, it could be the next.

Sammy couldn't believe, even after ten years, in the power of his boss, Joe Massino. He couldn't believe that any one man could have this sprawling town of close on half a million inhabitants in such a relentless grip that no one—not even a nutter—would dare attempt to steal the bag of money that Sammy was carrying.

Sammy had told himself often enough that he was crazy to be so scared since Johnny Bianda was always with him and Johnny was considered the best gunman of Massino's mob.

'If anything happens, Sammy,' Johnny had said, time and again, 'fall on the bag and leave the rest to me.'

These should be comforting words, but they didn't comfort Sammy. The fact that even Johnny thought something could happen turned Sammy sick to his stomach.

All the same, he told himself, it was a lot better than nothing to have Johnny's protection. He and Johnny had been Massino's collectors now for the past ten years. Sammy, at the age of twenty, had taken the job because the money was good and his nerves were in much better shape than now. Also, in spite of his fear, he was proud to have been picked as Massino's collector for that meant the boss trusted him. Well, maybe not quite trusted him for Johnny always went along and there was a fool-proof system against a fiddle. Sammy was given a sealed envelope containing the money and Johnny a sealed envelope containing a signed chit

stating the amount of the money. It was only when they got back to Massino's office and stood around while the money was being counted that they learned the amount they had collected and the amounts, during the ten years they had been collectors, increased every year until the take on the previous Friday had been the alarming (to Sammy) sum of sixty-three thousand dollars!

Sure, in spite of Massino's ruthless reputation and Johnny's ability to shoot fast, some nutter would be tempted to snatch the money, Sammy thought as he trudged along. He looked uneasily around him. The busy, shabby street teemed with people who made room for him, grinning at him and calling out to him.

A big black buck, nearly as big as Sammy, bawled from the steps of a tenement, 'Don't lose it, Sammy ol' boy, ol' boy. That little ol' bag's got my winnings!'

The crowd laughed and Sammy, sweating more heavily, lengthened his stride. They had one more call to make before they could get into Johnny's beat-up Ford and Sammy could relax.

Watched by the crowd, they walked into Solly Jacob's betting office.

Solly, vast, with a tremendous paunch and a face that looked as if it had been fashioned out of dough, had the envelopes ready.

'Not bad this week,' he said to Sammy, 'but tell Mr Joe, next week is going to be a bonanza. February 29th! Every sucker in town will be trying his luck. Tell Mr Joe you'll need a truck to bring the money in. Don't kid yourself you'll be able to carry it.'

Sammy cringed as he put the envelope in the bag.

'And, Johnny,' Solly said, handing Johnny his envelope, 'maybe it would be an idea to get more protection for Sammy next week. Have a word with Mr Joe.'

Johnny grunted. He was a man of few words. He turned to the door and went out into the street, followed by Sammy.

They had only a few yards to walk to where Johnny had parked his car and with relief Sammy got into the passenger's seat. The handcuff around his thick wrist was chafing his skin. That was another thing that scared him—to be handcuffed to the bag! He had once read of some bank clerk who had had his hand chopped off with an axe by some nutter, trying to get the bag from him. To be without a hand!

Johnny sank into the driving seat and searched for the ignition key. Sammy looked uneasily at him. He had an idea that Johnny had something preying on his mind. For the past few weeks, Johnny had been more silent than he had ever been. Yes, Sammy was sure something was preying on his mind and this worried him because he was fond of this short, thickset man with his thick black hair, shot with grey, his deep-set brown eyes and his firm, hard mouth. Sammy knew Johnny was as tough as teak and he

carried a punch like a sledge-hammer blow Sammy had never forgotten how Johnny had once handled a punk who had tried to pick a quarrel. He and Johnny were enjoying a beer in a downtown bar when this punk, twice Johnny's size, came up and said in a voice like a fall of gravel that he didn't drink in the same bar as a nigger.

Johnny had said quietly, 'Then drink somewhere else.'

That was something Sammy always admired about Johnny: he always spoke quietly; he never shouted.

The punk had turned on Sammy who was sweating with fright, but Johnny had stepped between them so the punk had hit him. To Sammy, it seemed a hell of a punch, but Johnny didn't even grunt. He swayed a little, then the punk took a bang on the jaw that broke it and flattened him. Sammy hadn't seen the punch; it had been too fast, but he had seen the effect.

Yes, Johnny was as tough as teak, but he was fine with Sammy. He didn't talk a lot. In fact, Sammy, after going around with him for ten years, knew little or nothing about him except that he had been Massino's gunman for some twenty years, was maybe forty-two or three years of age, unmarried, no relations, lived in a two-room apartment and Massino thought a lot of him.

Whenever Sammy got worried or had woman trouble or his young brother was playing up or something he would consult Johnny, and Johnny, speaking in his quiet voice, always managed to make Sammy feel good even if he didn't solve his problem.

When they began the collection together, Johnny had been more talkative. He had said something that Sammy had never forgotten.

'Listen, Sammy,' Johnny had said 'You'll make good money from this racket, but don't let it kid you. You put by ten per cent of what you earn every week. Understand? Out of every ten dollars you earn, put one dollar aside and don't touch it. In a few years you'll have enough to be independent and you can get out of this racket, for as sure as God made little apples, sooner or later, you'll want to get out.'

Sammy had followed this advice. It made sense to him. He bought a steel box and every week when he got paid he put ten per cent of his earnings in the box which he kept under his bed. Of course there had been times when he had been forced to milk the box.

There was that business with his brother who had to have five hundred dollars or go to jail. Then there was that business with Cloe who had to have an expensive abortion, but over the years the ten per cent mounted up and the last time Sammy checked the amount he was astonished to find he was worth three thousand dollars.

The box which wasn't large was getting too full of ten dollar bills for comfort and Sammy began to worry whether to buy another box. There was something about Johnny these days that made him hesitate to ask his advice. He was sure Johnny had something on his mind and he didn't want to be a nuisance. He thought maybe he would wait a little longer before consulting him. Maybe he would get whatever it was off his mind and then he would be in the mood to advise him.

They drove in silence to Massino's office—a large room with a big desk, a few chairs and a filing cabinet. Massino believed in austerity when he was down-town, although he had a Rolls, a sixteen-bedroom house up-town, a yacht and a ten-bedroom house in Miami.

He was at his desk when Johnny and Sammy came in. Leaning against the wall was Toni Capello, one of Massino's bodyguards—a thin, dark man with snake's eyes and nearly as fast as Johnny with a gun. Sitting on a hardbacked chair, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood was Elnie Lassini, another of Massino's bodyguards—a fat, hulking man with a razor scar down the left side of his face—another good man with a gun.

Sammy shambled up to the desk and put the bag in front of Massino who leaned back in his chair and grinned at the bag.

At the age of fifty-five, Joe Massino was massively built. Medium height, he had barn-door shoulders, no neck, a heavy fat face with a flattened nose, a straggly moustache and bleak grey eyes that scared men, but intrigued women. Massino was a great womanizer. Although fat, he was still tough and there had been times when he had personally disciplined one of his mob and that man hadn't been fit for active service for two or even three months.

'No problems, Sammy?' Massino asked and his small grey eyes shifted to Johnny who shook his head. 'Okay—get Andy.'

But Andy Lucas, Massino's accountant, had already come into the office.

Andy was sixty-five years of age—a tiny, birdlike man with a computer for a brain. Fifteen years ago he had served a stretch for fraud and when he had come out, Massino, realizing Andy's brilliance, had hired him to control his financial kingdom. As with most things Massino did, this was a wise choice. There was no one in the State as smart as Andy when it came to a tax form, an investment or an idea to make money.

Andy unlocked the handcuff from Sammy's sweating wrist, then pulling up a chair by Massino, he began to check the contents of the bag while Massino watched as he chewed a dead cigar.

Both Sammy and Johnny moved away and waited. The count came to sixty-five thousand dollars.

Andy put the money back in the bag, then nodding to Massino,

he carried the bag into his office and put it in the big, old-fashioned safe

'Okay, you two,' Massino said, looking at Johnny and Sammy, 'take time off I don't need you until next Friday You know what next Friday is?' His hard little eyes rested on Johnny

'The 29th'

Massino nodded 'That's it, the freak day Leap year's day It's my bet the take will be around \$150,000'

'Solly said the same'

'Yeah' Massino dropped the dead cigar into the trash basket. 'So Ernie and Toni will go with you You'll collect in the car. Never mind the traffic I'll have a word with the Commissioner. Next Friday, the cops will look the other way if you have to double park \$150,000 is a hell of a lot of money and maybe some hop-head just might try' He eyed Sammy 'Take it easy, boy, you'll be protected Don't sweat so'

Sammy forced a sick grin 'I'm not worried, boss,' he lied 'You tell me what to do and I'll do it'

Out in the drizzle, Johnny said, 'Come on, Sammy, let's have a beer'

This was the usual ritual after the collection and Sammy walked along beside the short, thickset man, gradually relaxing until they came to Freddy's bar They went into the warm darkness, climbed on stools and ordered beer

They drank in silence, then Sammy ordered more beer.

'Mr Johnny' He paused and looked uneasily at the hard, expressionless face 'Excuse me, but have you got worries? You're sort of quiet these days If there's anything I can do.' He began to sweat, scared he had talked out of turn

Johnny looked at him and smiled Johnny didn't often smile, but when he did it sent a glow of happiness through Sammy.

'No there's nothing' He lifted his heavy shoulders 'Maybe I'm getting old Anyway, thanks, Sammy' He took a packet of cigarettes, rolled one towards Sammy and lit up 'This is a hell of a life, isn't it? No future in it for us' He let smoke drift down his nostrils, then asked, 'How do you feel about it, Sammy?'

Sammy shifted on his stool 'The money's good, Mr Johnny. I get scared, but the money's good What else could I do?'

Johnny regarded him, then nodded 'That's right . . . what else can you do?' A pause, then he went on, 'Have you been saving?'

Sammy smiled happily

'Just like you told me, Mr Johnny One dollar in ten That's what you said and now I've got three thousand bucks in a box under my bed' He lost his smile as he paused 'I don't know what to do with it'

Johnny sighed 'You keep all that money under your bed?'

'What else can I do with it?'

'Put it in a bank, you goon.'

'I don't like banks, Mr Johnny,' Sammy said earnestly. 'They're for white men. It's best under my bed. I guess I'll have to buy another box.'

Although Sammy looked hopefully at Johnny wanting him to solve this problem, Johnny shrugged and finished his beer. He couldn't be bothered with Sammy's stupid problems. He had too many problems of his own.

'Please yourself.' He slid off the stool. 'Well, see you next Friday, Sammy.'

'Do you think there'll be trouble?' Sammy asked fearfully as he followed Johnny out into the drizzle.

Johnny saw the naked fear in Sammy's big, black eyes. He smiled.

'No trouble. Not with me, Ernie and Toni with you. Take it easy, Sammy. Nothing will happen.'

Sammy watched him drive away, then he set off along the street towards his pad. Friday was a long way off, he told himself \$150,000! the Boss had said. Was there that much money in the world? *Nothing would happen*. He'd believe that when Friday was over.

Johnny Bianda unlocked the door of his two-room apartment. He moved into the big living room and paused to look around. He had lived in this apartment now for the past eight years. It wasn't much, but that didn't worry Johnny. At least it was comfortable, although shabby. There were two battered lounging chairs, a settee, a TV set, a table, four upright chairs and a faded carpet. Through the door opposite was a tiny bedroom that just took a double bed and a night table with a built-in closet. There was a shower and a loo off the bedroom.

He took off his jacket, loosened his tie and parked his '38 automatic, then pulling up a chair to the window, he sat down.

The noise from the street drifted up to him. Noise never bothered him. He lit a cigarette and stared through the dirty window pane at the apartment block without seeing it.

Sammy had been right in guessing he had something on his mind. This something had been on his mind now for the past eighteen months. It had begun to nag him on his fortieth birthday. After celebrating with his girl friend, Melanie Carelli, and when she had fallen asleep, he had lain in the darkness and had thought about his past and had tried to imagine what his future was going to be. Forty years old! The half-way mark. Always provided he didn't have an accident, got lung cancer or stopped a bullet. Forty years old! His life half over!

He had thought of the years that had moved behind him. First, he thought of his mother who hadn't been able to read or write and who had worked herself to an early death to keep a roof over his head while his father who had been able to read but not write had slaved in a fruit-canning factory. Two decent God-fearing Italian immigrants who had loved him and had hoped for great things from him.

Just before she had died, his mother had given him her only possession—a silver St Christopher medal on a silver chain that had been in her family for over a century.

'There's nothing more I can do for you now, Johnny,' she had said. 'Take this—wear it always—as long as you wear it nothing really bad can happen to you. Remember that I've worn it all my life and nothing really bad has happened to me. It's been hard, but not really bad.'

He had been superstitious enough to have worn the medal and even now as he sat by the window, he put his fingers inside his shirt to touch the medal.

Lying by the side of the gently breathing Melanie, he had thought of the years after his mother's death. He hadn't settled to anything. He had got tired of his father's constant nagging and had left home. Although only seventeen, he had got a job as a bartender in a dive in Jacksonville. There he associated with the wide boys, the little crooks and the petty con men. He had hooked up with Ferdie Ciano, a small-time heist man. Together, they had pulled a number of jobs, mostly gas stations, until the police caught up with them. Johnny did a two-year stretch and that decided his fate. He came out of prison, educated in crime and sure that next time he wouldn't be caught. For a couple of years he worked solo as a stick-up man. The money hadn't amounted to anything but he was always hoping for something big. Then he ran into Ciano again who was now working for Joe Massino, an up and coming gangleader. Ciano took him along and Massino looked him over. He thought Johnny was made of the right material. He had been looking for a young, reliable man, good with a gun, to act as his bodyguard. Johnny knew little or nothing about guns. As a stick-up man he had used a toy pistol. This didn't bother Massino. He had Johnny trained. After three months, Johnny proved himself to be a top-class shot and during the years of Massino's rise to power, Johnny had killed three times, saving Massino's life each time from certain death. Now, he had been with Massino for the past twenty years. There were no more killings. Massino was firmly in the saddle. He not only controlled the Unions in this big town, but also the Numbers racket and there was no one powerful enough to challenge him. Johnny was no longer his bodyguard. He had been assigned to take care of Sammy

cancer But the idea kept coming back It even haunted his dreams until, finally, he told himself an idea was just an idea it could be looked at, couldn't it? There was no harm in looking at it, was there?

And when he began to look at it, he realized for the first time what it meant to be a loner It would have been so much better, so much more reassuring if he had someone to discuss the idea with, but there was no one. no one he could trust What was the use of talking about a thing like this with his only real solid friend Sammy the Black? What use would Melanie be if he told her what was going on in his mind? She would hate the idea of the sea and a boat She would think he had gone crazy Even if his mother had been alive, he couldn't have talked to her about it She would have been horrified His father had been too dumb, too much of a slave, to discuss with him any goddamn thing

So he had looked at this idea when he was alone as he was now beginning to look at it again while sitting at the window

Simply stated, the idea was for him to steal the Numbers collection, but to justify the high risk, he had, he told himself, to wait patiently until the big take came along as he knew it must from his past experience as a collector

And now here it was! February 29th! Something like \$150,000! The big take!

If I'm going to do it, if I'm ever going to own that boat, Johnny thought, Friday 29th is D-day! With that kind of money, I can buy a good boat, have money over so if the fishing charter idea flops, it won't matter With that kind of money and living carefully, I can last out until I die and still have the boat, the sea and nothing to worry about I swear I'll kiss the horses good-bye I might even kiss the chicks good-bye and I'll shut my ears to any future hard luck story!

Well, okay, he said to himself, as he settled his bulk more comfortably in the old lounging chair, so on Friday night of the 29th, you go ahead and take this money from Massino You've thought about it long enough You have made plans You have even gone so far as to take an impression of the key of Andy's safe You have gone even further than that you have made a duplicate key from the impression that you know will open the safe That was where those two years in jail had paid off you learned things like taking key impressions and making keys from the impressions.

He paused here to recall just how he had got the impression and tiny beads broke out of his forehead when he remembered the risk he had run

The safe was a big hunk of old-fashioned metal that stood in Andy's tiny office, facing the door. The safe had belonged to Massino's grandfather

More than once, Johnny had heard Andy complain about the safe to Massino

You want something modern,' Andy had said 'A kid could bust into this goddamn thing Why not let me get rid of it and fix you with something modern?'

Johnny well remembered Massino's reply

'That safe belonged to my grandfather What was good enough for him is good enough for me I'll tell you something that safe is a symbol of my power There's no one in this town who dare touch it except you and me You put the take in there every Friday and everyone in this town knows the take will be there on Saturday morning for the pay out Why? Because they know no one would have the guts to touch anything that belongs to me That safe is as safe as my power and let me tell you, my power is very safe!'

But Andy had tried again

'I know all that, Mr Joe,' he had said while Johnny had listened, 'but there might be some out-of-town nutter who couldn't resist trying So why take a chance?'

Massino had stared at Andy, his eyes like little pools of ice

'If anyone busts into that safe, I go after him,' he said 'He wouldn't get far Anyone who takes anything from me had better talk to a grave-digger but they won't There's no one dumb enough to try to take anything from me'

But Massino hedged his bets He had done that most of his life and it had paid off When the Numbers money was locked in the safe on Friday, he left Benno Bianco locked with the safe in Andy's office. Not that Benno was anything special He had once been an up and coming welter-weight, but he hadn't got very far He was pretty good with a gun and he looked tough a lot tougher than he was But that didn't matter Benno came cheap He hadn't cost Massino much and the suckers of the town were impressed by his battered face, the way he walked and spat on the sidewalk They thought he was real tough and that was what Massino wanted them to think With Benno locked in the office, with Massino's reputation and that great hunk of safe, the suckers who parted with their money felt sure that when they came to pay-out day, the money would be there, waiting for them

Johnny knew all this The opening of the safe and Benno presented no problem. He remembered what Massino had said *No one would have the guts to touch anything that belonged to me*

Well, Johnny was going to touch something that belonged to Massino Guts? Probably not, but the urge to get his hands on such a sum, the smell of the sea, the dream of a beautiful thirty-footer added up to a lot more than guts A grave-digger? There

would be no grave-digger if his planning was right, Johnny told himself

The big safe remained empty all the week. It was only on Friday that it was used. There was no combination, just a heavy old-fashioned key. During the months, Johnny, passing by Andy's open door, got to know that the key was often left in the lock. On Friday when the take was put in the safe, Andy took the key home with him. Three times, long after midnight, Johnny had entered the building, gone up to Andy's office, picked the door lock and had hunted for the key. Third time lucky! On a Wednesday night, he had found the key in the safe. He had come prepared with a lump of softened putty. The impression had taken only a few seconds, but God! how he had sweated!

No one was ever allowed inside Andy's office. If someone wanted to speak to him that someone stayed in the doorway and did his talking but never crossed the threshold. Andy had a thing about this. The only exception was when Benno guarded the safe on Friday nights, then Andy would clear his desk, lock every drawer and generally behave as if vermin was invading his holy of holies.

It took Johnny three nights to make the key, then on the fourth night he returned to the building, again picking the door lock to Andy's office and tried out his handiwork. A touch with a file, a drop of oil and the key worked perfectly.

Taking the money was now easy. Even fixing Benno wasn't too tricky. It was what happened when Massino found he had been robbed that mattered.

There's no one dumb enough to try to take anything from me

The trick in this steal, Johnny had decided, was not to let Massino find out who had taken the money. Once Massino knew who the thief was, that thief had as much chance of surviving as a scoop of ice cream dropped into a furnace.

Massino was affiliated with the Mafia to whom he paid regular dues. His own organization could take care of the town—he would get away as fast as he could. So Massino would call his opposite Mafia number and alert him. The whole of the Mafia organization would swing into action. No one steals from the Mafia or its friends without paying for it. That was a matter of principle. There wouldn't be a town nor a city in the whole country that would be safe. Johnny knew all this, and his plan was to fix things so that no one could guess who had taken the money.

He had thought about this a lot as his future and his life depended on it. When he had the money, he would rush it across the street to the Greyhound left-luggage lockers and dump it there. The money would stay there until the heat cooled off—probably three or four weeks. Then when he was sure Massino was convinced whoever had grabbed the money had got away with it, he

(Johnny) would move the money to a safe-deposit bank. He wished he could do this as soon as he had the money, but his alibi depended on speed. The Greyhound bus station was right opposite Massino's office. It would be only a matter of minutes to dump the bag and get back to Melanie's pad. The safe-deposit bank was at the other end of the town and anyway it would be shut for the night.

The whole operation involved great patience. Once the money was in the safe-deposit bank, Johnny knew he would have to wait two or three years, but he could wait, knowing when he left town he would have all that money to set up somewhere in Florida, get his boat and achieve his ambition. What were two or three years after waiting all this time?

Massino had the police in his pocket. Johnny knew the police would be called in once the robbery was discovered and they would go over the safe and Andy's office for fingerprints. That didn't worry Johnny. He would wear gloves and have an unassailable alibi—he would be in bed with Melanie during the time of the steal with his car parked outside her pad. He knew he could rely on Melanie to cover those thirty minutes when he was making the steal.

Because the safe had been obviously opened by a key, the full weight of Massino's suspicions would fall on Andy, and the police would really take Andy to the cleaners since he had the only key and had a criminal record. Maybe Andy wouldn't be able to clear himself, but if he did, then Massino would look around at the other members of his mob. He would know it was an inside job because of the key. He had two hundred men who came and went. The last man, Johnny told himself, he would suspect was his faithful Johnny who had saved his life three times in the past, had always behaved himself and had always done as he was told.

Sitting there before the window, Johnny went over the plan again and again and he couldn't fault it and yet he was uneasy.

He could hear Massino's harsh, ruthless voice saying *There's no one dumb enough to try to take anything from me*.

But there could be someone smart enough, Johnny thought and putting his fingers inside his shirt, he touched the St Christopher medal.

CHAPTER TWO

MELANIE CARELLI, Johnny's girl, had been born in a Naples slum. At the age of four she had been sent out on to the streets with other kids to beg from the tourists. Life had been hard for her and also for her parents. Her father, a cupple, had touted

postcards, and faked Parker pens outside the better-class hotels; her mother had taken in washing

When Melanie reached the age of fifteen, her grandfather, who had a tailoring business in Brooklyn, wrote to say he could use her in his tiny factory and her mother and father were glad to see her go the steerage fare provided for by her grandfather. Melanie was too keen on the boys and her parents dreaded the almost certain prospect that sooner or later she would land them with an unwanted baby.

For three soul-destroying years she had worked in the factory and finally decided this wasn't going to be her way of life. She stole fifty dollars from her grandfather and left Brooklyn. Arriving at East City, Johnny's town, she decided it was far enough away from New York to be safe and she settled there. She had no need to worry about safety: her grandfather was only too happy to find her missing.

She got a job as a waitress in a sleazy snack bar, but the hours were killing. She quit and other jobs followed, then after a year she finally got taken on in one of the many cheap stores in town which suited her. The pay wasn't much, but at least she was on her own with no one to tell her what to do or how to behave and she had a tiny room that belonged to her, and to her only.

Melanie was sexually attractive without being pretty. She had long, coal-black hair, large breasts and solid hips and the hot sun of Naples in her loins. Men, looking at her, knew it. The store buyer, a timid, fat man living in terror of his wife, became infatuated with her. She allowed him from time to time to put his hand up her skirt but no more, and in return he put her in charge of the men's shirt counter with a raise in pay.

It was while Johnny Bianda was buying shirts that he became aware of her. At that moment, he was without a girl, having quarrelled with a pick-up who had been too exacting, and he was in need of a girl. As always, Melanie was in need of a man. He dated her for dinner, proved he was generous and for the past three years they had been going steady.

Within two months of meeting Johnny, Melanie moved out of her tiny room and into a two-room apartment in a walk-up, Johnny providing the rent and the furnishing.

In spite of being grateful and liking Johnny, Melanie regretted that he was so much older than she, that he was bulky and far from glamorous, but he treated her right, was nice to her and always had money to spend on her. They met three times a week, sometimes he would take her out to dinner and then to a movie, sometimes she would cook Italian food for him at home. Whatever the programme, they always finished up on the big double

bed that Johnny had bought for her, and it was then, after so much experience with younger men, that she really appreciated Johnny as a lover. He and no one else could satisfy her.

To Johnny, Melanie, although so much younger than he and with no thoughts in her head, was a girl he felt he could trust and this was important to him. He was sick of the diggers, the cheats and the toughies with whom he had previously associated. Melanie came as a breath of fresh air. To him, she was more than attractive—she was wildly eager in bed and she didn't yak as all those other women had yakked. She would be content to sit by his side in silence or talk when he was in the mood, and she never hinted of marriage.

Johnny felt in his bones he would never marry. He didn't want a permanent woman—all he wanted was a boat and the sea and sex when the mood was on him. Sooner or later, he knew he would lose Melanie. Some young punk with a little money would come along and that would be that. Because he knew he would eventually lose her, he had never told her about his urge to own a boat, and now he was committed to the steal, he was thankful he hadn't told her—that he had told no one. Massino was an expert at squeezing information from anyone when he wanted and if the steal turned sour and Massino even suspected it was he (Johnny) who had taken the money he would brutally quizz everyone connected with Johnny. If Massino ever got the idea that Johnny was boat mad, it would be good-bye to the boat.

Most of Massino's mob knew that Johnny's girl was Melanie. You can't take a girl out three times a week for three years without running into some of the mob at the restaurants. Johnny could afford nor at a movie house showing the latest film. This thought worried Johnny a little, although he kept assuring himself that nothing would turn sour the way he had planned the steal and that Massino would never suspect he was the thief. He was fond of Melanie. Love? No, he told himself, he wasn't in love with her. He felt that love didn't come into his life. Love bound a man, but he was fond of her and wouldn't want anything to happen to her.

He lit another cigarette. In the street below a child yelled, a woman called across the street to another woman, the car crawled by in low gear, making a racket of noise. Listening to the noise, he thought of the sea in the sunshine and felt the breeze against his face. His hands closed on the spokes of the tiller and he heard the murmur of the powerful engines. Patience, he told himself. Two or three years and he would be afloat.

Every Friday night he took Melanie out to dinner and then to a movie. This night—he glanced at his watch—he would be taking her out. Next Friday would be different, but he wouldn't tell her

tonight He would jump it on her Although she wasn't a talker, if she knew beforehand that next Friday was going to be special, she might worry

He spent the next two hours going over his plan again and again, then finally, realizing the futility of this constant rehashing, he got up, stripped off and took a shower

An hour later he picked Melanie up outside her apartment and drove her to Luigi's restaurant

They had a good Italian dinner They didn't have much to say to each other Melanie always seemed to be hungry and when the food was placed before her, she ate happily and in silence while Johnny, now thinking of Friday 29th, pushed his food around on the plate and didn't eat much He kept looking at her His eyes took away her clothes and saw her olive-skinned, lush body naked and he thought of the wasted three hours ahead of them when they would sit in a stuffy movie house and watch some goddamn film before he could lay her on her back on the big double bed

'Have you something on your mind, Johnny?' Melanie asked suddenly She had devoured an enormous plate of spaghetti and was sitting back, eager for the next course, her big breasts forcing themselves against her cheap skimpy dress

Johnny jerked his thoughts back to her and he smiled

'Just looking at you, baby,' he said and put his hand over hers 'Right now, I've got the hots for you'

She felt a hot rush of blood to her loins

'Me too Let's skip the movie tonight Let's go back and have a real ball'

That was what he wanted and his fingers closed tightly over the back of her hand

'You have yourself a deal, baby'

Then a shadow fell across the table and Johnny looked up

Toni Capello was standing there He was wearing a black suit, a yellow-and-white striped shirt and a yellow kipper tie He looked very dressy, but his flat snake's eyes remained snake's eyes

'Hi, Johnny,' he said and his eyes shifted to Melanie and then back to Johnny 'The boss wants you'

Johnny turned hot with anger He knew Toni was almost as good as he was (had been?) with a gun and he hated Toni as he knew Toni hated him

He sensed Melanie was scared He glanced at her and saw she was looking at Toni with wide, frightened eyes

'What do you mean . . . he wants me?' Johnny demanded

A waiter hovered to change the plates, then moved away.

'Like I said he wants you and pronto'

Johnny drew in a long deep breath.

'Okay. I'll be along Where?'

'At his place and right now I'll take the doll back to her pad'
Toni smirked 'A pleasure'

'Get the hell out of here, you cheap punk,' Johnny said quietly and dangerously 'I'll be there, but in my time'

Toni sneered

'Okay, if you want to cut your throat that's fine with me I'll tell the boss,' and he walked out of the restaurant

Melanie turned, her eyes wide 'What is it, Johnny?'

He wished he knew He had never been called to Massino's house before

He felt cold sweat start out on his forehead

'Sorry, baby,' he said gently 'I have to go Suppose you finish your dinner, then take a taxi home and wait for me'

'Oh, no! I . . .'

He got up and was moving around the table

'Do it, baby, to please me,' he said, a hard note creeping into his voice

There was something now about him that frightened her He had lost colour, seemed to have shrunk a little and there were sweat beads on his forehead

She forced a smile

'Okay, Johnny, I'll be waiting for you'

He had a word with the waiter and slipped him a bill, then giving her a wave, he went out on to the street

It took him some twenty minutes in the heavy traffic to reach Massino's house on 10th street He found parking with difficulty and walked up the marble steps leading to the massive front door

While he had been driving, his mind had been racing What in God's name, he wondered, did Massino want him for at this hour? Never before had he been summoned to this opulent house He rang the bell, and as he was wiping his sweating hands on his handkerchief, the door opened and a lean, hard-faced man wearing a tail coat and a winged collar (for God's sake!) aping an English butler from the old movies, stood aside to let Johnny enter the vast hall, lined on either side with oil paintings in gilt frames and several suits of polished armour

'Go ahead, bud,' the butler said out of the side of his mouth 'First door right'

Johnny entered a large room, lined with books and full of heavy dark furniture Joe Massino was lounging in a big wing chair, smoking a cigar, a glass of whisky and water at his elbow Sitting in the shadows was Ernie Lassini, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood

'Come on in, Johnny,' Massino said 'Sit down' He waved to a chair opposite him 'What'll you drink?'

Johnny sat down stiffly.

'A whisky will do fine, thank you,' he said

'Ernie, get Johnny a whisky and then get your ass out of here'

There was a long pause while Ernie fixed the drink which he handed to Johnny, his fat, scarred face dead pan, then he left the room

'Cigar?' Massino asked

'No, thanks, Mr Joe'

Massino grinned 'Did I interrupt something?'

'Yeah' Johnny stared at the big man 'You sure did'

Massino laughed, then leaning forward he slapped Johnny on his knee 'It'll keep She'll be all the more eager when you get to her'

Johnny didn't say anything Holding the drink in his sweating hand, he waited

Massino stretched out his thick legs, drew on his cigar and puffed smoke to the ceiling He looked very relaxed and amiable, but Johnny didn't relax He had seen Massino in this mood before It could change into snarling rage in seconds

'Nice little pad I've got here, huh?' Massino said, looking around the room 'The wife fixed it up All these goddamn books She reckons they look fancy You ever read a book, Johnny?'

'No'

'Nor do I Who the hell wants to read a book?' The little cold grey eyes moved over Johnny 'Well, never mind that, I've been thinking about you, Johnny You've worked for me close on twenty years correct?'

Here it is, Johnny thought The kiss-off Well, he had been expecting it, but not quite as soon as this

'I guess it's around twenty years,' he said

'What do I pay you, Johnny?'

'Two hundred a week'

'That's what Andy tells me Yeah two hundred You should have squawked long before now'

'I'm not squawking,' Johnny said quietly 'I guess a guy gets paid what he deserves'

Massino squinted at him

'That's not the way these other punks think They're always moaning for more money' He drank some of his whisky, paused, then went on, 'You're my best man, Johnny There's something in you that gets to me Maybe I remember your shooting I wouldn't be here with all these fancy goddamn books around me if it hadn't been for you three times wasn't it?'

'Yeah'

'Three times' Massino shook his head 'Some shooting' Again a long pause, then he said, 'If you had come to me two three years ago and said you wanted more money, I'd have given it to

you ' The red tip of his cigar suddenly pointed at Johnny 'Why didn't you?'

'I've told you, Mr Joe,' Johnny said 'A guy gets paid what he deserves I don't do much I work off and on Friday is the big day so '

'You and Sammy get along okay'

'Sure '

'He's scared He hates the job, doesn't he?'

'He needs the money '

'That's right I'm thinking of making a change I've had a beef or two from the boys Times change They don't seem to like a smoke picking up the money I want your angle Do you think I should make a change?'

Johnny's mind moved swiftly This was no time to support anyone, even Sammy In another six days—if it worked out—he would have something like \$150,000 hidden away

'I walk it with Sammy,' he said woodenly 'That's been my job for ten years, Mr Joe I'll walk it with anyone you pick '

'I'm thinking of making a complete change,' Massino said 'You and Samm Ten years is a hell of a time Can Sammy drive a car?'

'Sure and he knows cars He started life in a garage '

'I heard that Think he'd like to be my chauffeur ' The wife has been nagging me She says it isn't good class for me to drive the Rolls She wants a uniform for God's sake! She thinks Samm would look real good in a uniform '

'You can but ask him, Mr Joe '

'You talk to him, Johnny What does he get paid?'

'A hundred '

'Okay, tell him it's worth a hundred and fifty '

'I'll tell him '

Again a long pause while Johnny waited to hear his own fate 'Now you, Johnny,' Massino said 'You're a well-known character in this town People like and respect you You've got a reputation How would you like to take over the one-arm bandits?'

Johnny stiffened This was the last thing he expected to be offered . the last thing he wanted Bernie Schultz, a fat, ageing man, looked after these gambling machines for Massino had looked after them for the past five years He had often moaned to Johnny about his worries, how Andy was continually chasing him if the take from these machines fell below what Bernie declared was an impossible weekly target

He remembered Bernie, sweating, dark rings around his eyes, saying, 'The goddamn job isn't worth it, Johnny You've no idea You're always under pressure from that sonofabitch to find new

outlets You walk your goddamn feet off trying to get creeps to take the machines Then if they take them some goddamn kid busts them You never stop working'

'How about Bernie?' Johnny asked to gain time

'Bernie's washed up' Massino's amiable expression changed and he now became the cold, ruthless executive 'You can handle this, Johnny You won't have trouble in finding new outlets People respect you It'll be worth four hundred and a one per cent cut could net you eight hundred if you really got stuck into the job What do you say?'

Johnny thought swiftly This was an offer he dare not refuse He was sure if he did, he would be out and he wasn't yet ready to be kissed off

Looking straight at Massino, he said, 'When do I start?'

Massino grinned and, leaning forward, he slapped Johnny's knee

'That's the way I like a guy to talk,' he said 'I knew I'd picked the right one You start the first of the month I'll have Bernie fixed by then You talk it over with Andy He'll wise you up' He got to his feet, looked at his watch and grimaced 'I've got to move along Got to take the wife to some goddamn shindig Well, okay, Johnny, that's a deal You've got yourself eight hundred bucks a week' He put his heavy arm around Johnny's shoulders and led him to the door 'Talk to Sammy If he wants the job, tell him to see Andy who will fix his uniform You two do the next collection and then you start your new jobs right?'

'That's fine with me,' Johnny said and moved out into the big hall where the butler was waiting

'See you,' Massino said and strode up the stairs, whistling under his breath and out of Johnny's sight

Reaching his car, Johnny stood hesitating He looked at his watch The time was 21 05 Knowing Melanie's eating capacity he guessed she would be occupied for another half hour He decided it might pay off to have a word with Bernie Schultz

He drove across town and reached Bernie's apartment in fifteen minutes He found Bernie at home, his shoes off, a beer in his hand, watching TV

Bernie's wife, a big, fat happy-faced woman let him in and then went into the kitchen because she knew these two were going to talk business and she never mixed herself up in any of Bernie's machinations

Johnny didn't hedge

As soon as Bernie had turned off the TV and offered beer which Johnny refused, Johnny said, 'I've just talked with Mr Joe. You're getting the kiss-off, Bernie, and I'm getting your job.'

Bernie stared at him 'Come again?'

Johnny repeated what he had said

'You really mean that no kidding?'

'I'm telling you'

Bernie drew in a long, deep breath and his heavy, fat face lit up with a broad grin Suddenly, he looked ten years younger

'Is that great news?' He clapped his hands together 'I've been praying for this for years! So, now I'm free!'

'I guessed you would feel that way,' Johnny said 'That's why I came right over What'll you do, Bernie? You'll be out of the organization'

'Do? Me?' Bernie laughed happily 'I've got money put by My brother-in-law owns a fruit farm in California That's where I'll be partners, picking fruit in the sun with not a goddamn care in the world!'

'Yeah' Johnny's mind shifted to his dream boat and the sea 'Well, I've got your job, Bernie What's it worth?'

Bernie finished his beer, belched and set down the glass

'Mr Joe pays me a flat eight hundred a week and one per cent of the take, but the one per cent means nothing All the goddamn years I've worked, I've never reached the target above that son-of-a-bitch Andy's target, so you can forget the one per cent But you get paid eight hundred steady, Johnny, although the job is sheer hell I've managed to save out of what I got paid and you can too'

Eight hundred a week and Massino had offered him only four hundred and one per cent which according to Bernie meant nothing!

A cold, fierce rage took hold of Johnny, but he controlled it

You're my best man, Johnny There's something in you that gets to me

That's what the thieving, double-crossing son-of-a-bitch had said! Well, okay, Johnny thought as he got to his feet, I'll be a thieving son-of-a-bitch too!

Leaving Bernie, he went down to where he had parked his car Still raging, he drove fast to Melanie's pad

The following morning when Melanie had gone to work, Johnny returned to his apartment and cooked himself breakfast which was his favourite meal He had the whole day before him with no plans He was in a surly mood Massino's meanness still irked him He had now no misgivings about robbing him, that was for sure

As he was sitting down to three fried eggs and a thick slice of grilled ham, the telephone bell rang Cursing, he got up and lifted the receiver

It was Andy Lucas on the line

'Mr Joe says you're to take over Bernie's job,' Andy said 'You

two had better get together See him today He'll take you around with him and give you introductions'

'Okay,' Johnny said, eyeing his breakfast I'll do that'

'And listen, Johnny' Andy's voice was cold 'Bernie has been lying down on the job I ll expect you to increase the business We want at least two hundred more machines out and that'll be your job understand?'

'Sure'

'Okay go talk to Bernie,' and Andy hung up

Johnny returned to his breakfast but he hadn't the appetite he had had before the telephone call

A little after 11 00, he went out and headed for Bernie's office a one-room affair on the top floor of a walk-up office block As he was waiting for the traffic lights to change so he could cross the road, he saw Sammy the Black waiting to cross on the other side of the street

Sammy grinned and waved and when the traffic stopped, Johnny joined him

'Hi, Sammy what are you doing?'

'Me?' Sammy looked vague 'Not a thing, Mr Johnny Not much doing on Saturday just mooching around'

Johnny had forgotten it was Saturday Tomorrow would be Sunday He hated Sundays with the shops shut and people going out of town Usually he spent Sunday mornings reading the papers and then joining Melanie in the late afternoon Sunday morning she was always busy, cleaning her apartment, washing her hair and doing all the goddamn chores women seem to find to do

'Want coffee?' Johnny asked

'Always say yes to coffee' Sammy looked uneasily at Johnny The hard expression on Johnny's face bothered him 'Something wrong?'

'Let's have coffee' Johnny led the way to the café and propped himself up against the bar He ordered the coffees, then said, 'I was talking to Mr Joe last night' He went on to tell Sammy what Massino had said 'It's up to you Do you want to drive his car?'

Sammy's face lit up as if he had swallowed a lighted electric light bulb

'Is this straight, Mr Johnny?'

'That's what he said'

'Sure do!' Sammy slapped his pink palms together 'You mean I don't have to collect any more money?'

Johnny thought sourly another one! Bernie, beaming from ear to ear, now Sammy They have it smooth while I get it rough

'You have to wear a uniform and drive his Rolls Like the idea?'

'Sure do! Is this good news!' Sammy paused then looked at Johnny 'When do I start?'

'The week after next'

Sammy's face fell.

'You mean I've got the collection next Friday to do?'

'That's right'

Sammy's eyes rolled and sweat broke out on his face

'Couldn't the new man do the job, Mr Johnny? Who's the new man anyway?'

'I wouldn't know We make the collection together on the 29th, Sammy' Johnny finished his coffee 'So forget it'

'Yes' Sammy blotted his sweating face with his handkerchief 'You think it'll be all right?'

'Can't go wrong' Johnny moved away from the bar 'I've things to do Go see Andy Tell him you'll drive for Mr Joe He'll fix everything It pays a hundred and fifty'

Sammy's eyes opened wide

'A hundred and fifty?'

'That's what Mr Joe said' Johnny looked thoughtfully at Sammy 'Are you still keeping your savings under your bed?'

'Where else should I keep it, Mr Johnny?'

'I told you, you dope, in a goddamn bank!'

'I wouldn't do that,' Sammy said, shaking his head 'Banks are for white people'

Johnny shrugged

'Be seeing you' He paid for the coffees and walked out of the café Ten minutes later he was in Bernie Schultz's office

Bernie was resting behind his battered desk, his chair pushed back, his thumbs hooked to his belt

When he saw Johnny, he straightened up

'Andy said I was to look in,' Johnny said 'He said you'd give me introductions and take me around'

'Sure will,' Bernie said, 'but not today This is the weekend for God's sake! No business at weekends Suppose we start Monday, huh? Come here around ten o'clock I'll show you around Okay?'

'Anything you say' Johnny started towards the door

'Oh, Johnny

Johnny paused and looked at Bernie who was scratching his fat jawl 'Yeah?'

'I guess I flapped with my big mouth' Bernie shifted uneasily in his chair 'Andy told me I wasn't to tell you what I get paid Can you forget it?'

Johnny's hands turned to fists, but he managed a cold grin

'Sure I've forgotten it, Bernie See you Monday,' and he left the little office and tramped down the six flights of stairs, swearing under his breath

As he was within a five-minute walk from the Greyhound bus station, he made his way there. Reaching the station, he paused to look across the street and up at Massino's office windows. Massino was probably in flight to Miami for a long weekend, but Johnny was sure that Andy was up there in his poky office.

He went into the bus station and made his way to the left luggage lockers. He stopped to read the instructions printed on the door of one of the lockers. The key, he read, had to be collected from the attendant. He glanced around. Seeing no one among the milling crowd he knew, he wandered over to the attendant's cubby-hole.

A big, sleepy-looking negro peered at him.

'Let's have a key,' Johnny said. 'How much?'

'How long do you want it for, boss?'

'Three weeks—maybe longer. I don't know.'

The negro handed over the key.

'Half a buck a week—that'll be a buck and a half for three weeks.'

Johnny paid, dropped the key into his pocket, then went to locate the locker. It was conveniently placed, just inside the entrance door. Satisfied, he walked out and made his way back to his apartment.

He spent the next hour sitting before his window, thinking of Massino. Around 14.00 just when he was thinking of getting a snack for lunch the telephone bell rang.

Grimacing, he got to his feet and lifted the receiver.

'Johnny?'

'Hi, baby!' He was surprised that Melanie should be calling. He had arranged to take her for a drive on Sunday afternoon and then spend the night with her.

'I've got the curse, Johnny. It started just now,' Melanie said. 'I'm feeling like hell. Can we forget tomorrow?'

Women! Johnny thought. Always something wrong! But he knew Melanie really suffered when she had her period. This would mean a long, lonely, dreary weekend for him.

'Sorry about that, baby,' he said gently. 'Sure, we'll forget tomorrow. There'll be plenty of other Sundays. Anything I can do?'

'Nothing. As soon as I get home I'll go to bed. It doesn't last all that long.'

'You want any food?'

'I'll take in something. You have a nice time, Johnny. I'll call you as soon as it's over and then we'll have fun.'

'Yeah. Well, look after yourself,' and Johnny hung up.

He wandered around the room wondering what the hell he would do over the weekend. He took out his wallet and checked

his money He had one hundred and eight dollars of his pay left This would have to last him until next Friday He hesitated It would be good to get in his car and drive down to the coast a three-hundred-mile drive He could put up at a motel and walk by the sea, but it would cost He couldn't afford that kind of weekend Fine for Massino who had all the money in the world, but strictly not for Johnny Bianda

Shrugging, he crossed over to the TV set and turned it on He sat down before the screen and gave himself over, with bored indifference, to a ball game

As he watched, his mind dwelt on the time when he would be on his boat, feeling the lift and fall of the deck, feeling the spray of the sea against his face and the heat of the sun

Patience, he told himself, patience

CHAPTER THREE

JOHNNY CAME AWAKE with a start and looked at his strap watch, then he relaxed The time was 06 30 plenty of time, he told himself and he looked at Melanie, sleeping by his side Her long black hair half covered her face and she was making a soft snorting sound as she slept.

Cautiously, not to disturb her, he reached for his pack of cigarettes on the bedside table, lit up and dragged smoke gratefully into his lungs

Today, he told himself, was D-day Friday 29th The collection began at 10 00 By 15 00 he and Sammy would have collected something like \$150,000! The Big Take! In eighteen hours' time, if he had any luck, all this money would be his and safely stashed away in a Greyhound luggage locker

If he had any luck

He fingered the St Christopher medal lying on his bare chest He thought of his mother *as long as you wear it, nothing really bad can happen to you*

Lying still, he recalled the past days that had slipped away so quickly On Monday, he had gone the rounds with Bernie, meeting people, hearing them yak, looking for new sites for the one-arm bandits To Bernie's startled amazement, Johnny had placed five machines in new locations on his first day As usual, Massino had made the right choice in picking Johnny Most people, living in the City, knew Johnny by reputation a tough, hard man and good with a gun When he walked into some café and looked directly at the owner, suggesting in his quiet voice that the owner could do with one of Massino's gambling machines, there was no argument

Even Andy had been pleased when Johnny's total for four days had been eighteen machines placed in new locations

Now here was Friday 29th. One more collection and he would then move into the world of one-arm bandits and Bernie would gratefully bow out. These past four days had told Johnny that the job wasn't all that bad. Unlike Bernie, he had the reputation behind him to wave in people's faces. He realized no one respected Bernie and he marvelled that Bernie had lasted as long as he had.

Johnny touched off the ash of his cigarette as he stared up at the ceiling. He was relieved that he had no qualms, no feeling of nerves. He thought of all that money—\$150,000! He mustn't be too successful with the one-arm bandits, he warned himself. He wanted to retire from the scene in two years. He could wait that long, but no longer. His first year would be good. Maybe, he might even qualify for the one per cent deal, but the following year, he would slow down, appearing to lose his grip, and knowing Massino and Andy they would look around for a younger man. Then he could bow out as Bernie was now bowing out.

Melanie stirred and half sat up.

'You want coffee, honey?' she asked sleepily.

He stubbed out his cigarette and leaned over her.

'There's time.' His fingers caressed her breast and she sighed happily.

Later, when they were having breakfast, Johnny said casually, 'I'll see you tonight, baby. We'll go to Luigi's.'

Melanie, happily eating pancakes and syrup, nodded.

'Yes, Johnny.'

He paused, not quite sure how to tell her. Goddamn it! He thought, this can't be complicated. Tell her half the truth. She'll buy anything—just half the truth.

'Baby, I have a job to do tonight,' he said as he cut into his pancake. 'Are you listening?'

She looked up. The syrup was making a tiny trickle down her chin.

'Yes.'

'This job is nothing to do with my boss and he wouldn't want me to do it. It means a little more money for me, but Massino mustn't know about it.' He paused and looked at her. She was listening. Her black eyes were already showing signs of panic. She had always been terrified of Massino and hated Johnny working for him. 'There's nothing to worry about,' he went on, his voice soft and soothing. 'You know what an alibi means?'

She put down her knife and fork and nodded.

'I need an alibi, baby, and I want you to supply it. Now listen, tonight, we eat at Luigi's, then we come here. I leave my car outside. Around midnight I'll leave you for thirty minutes while I

do this job I come back and if any questions are asked you say I didn't leave you once we got back after dinner Get it?

Melanie put her hands to her face and her elbows on the table It was a bad sign, Johnny told himself that she had now lost interest in her food

'What job?' she asked

He too suddenly didn't want anything more to eat He pushed his plate aside and lit a cigarette

That's something you needn't know, baby,' he said 'It's a job All you have to tell anyone who might ask is that we spent the night here together and I didn't leave you for a second Will you do that?'

She stared at him, her soft black eyes frightened

'Who will ask?'

'The chances are no one will ask, baby' He forced a smile 'But maybe the fuzz will ask maybe Massino'

She flinched 'I don't want trouble, Johnny No don't ask me to do it'

He pushed back his chair and stood up He had half expected this reaction, knowing Melanie as he did He moved to the window and looked down at the slow-moving traffic He was sure of her She would do it, he told himself, but she needed to be persuaded

He let a long silence build up, then turning, he came back to the table and sat down

'I've never asked you to do anything for me, have I? Not once I've done a lot for you You have this apartment, the furniture, you have lots of things I have given you, but never once have I ever asked you to do anything for me now I'm asking It's important'

She stared at him 'I just have to say that you were here tonight and you didn't leave?'

'That's it You say after we had dinner at Luigi's we came back here and I didn't leave here until eight o'clock in the morning Get it? I didn't move from here from ten tonight until eight tomorrow'

Melanie looked down at her cold pancake 'Well, if it's so important, I guess I could say that,' she said doubtfully

'That's fine' He wished he could convey to her how important it was 'So, okay, you'll do it?'

'I don't like doing it, but I'll do it'

He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to control his exasperation 'Baby, this is serious The fuzz could yell at you You know how the fuzz act You must stick with this Even if Massino bawls at you, you must stick with this Do you understand?'

'Must I do it, Johnny? I'd rather not'

He fondled her hand, trying to instil confidence in her

'You'll be repaying a debt, baby Don't you want to help me?'

She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes showing her fear, then she put her other hand over his and gripped it hard

'Okay, Johnny . I'll do it '

And he knew by the tone of her voice she would do it and he relaxed

He got to his feet and she came around the table to press herself against him His hand slid up under her nightdress and cupped her heavy buttocks

'I've got to get moving, baby,' he said 'See you tonight Don't worry it's nothing, baby just a little lie '

Leaving her, he ran down the stairs and to where he had parked his car Ten minutes later, he was back in his apartment He shaved and showered As he stood under the cold water, he wondered if Melanie would have the guts to face Massino if things turned sour Maybe she would He touched his St Christopher medal The trick with this steal was not to let Massino nor the fuzz even suspect who had taken the money

He drove up to Massino's office, arriving there a few minutes to 10 00 Toni Capello and Ernie Lassini were already there, propping up a wall in the office, smoking Sammy came up the stairs as Johnny entered the office

'Hi!' Johnny paused 'The big day You got your uniform fixed?'

Sammy's face was already glistening with sweat. There was a grey tinge under the black of his skin. Johnny could see he was scared to death and he knew Sammy's panic would grow as the collection went on

'Mr Andy's fixing it,' Sammy said huskily and moved into the office

Toni and Ernie greeted them The four men stood around for some minutes, then Andy came from his office with two collection bags They were handcuffed together and there was a spare handcuff which Andy snapped on Sammy's wrist and which was attached to one of the bags

Toni said, 'I wouldn't have your job for a thousand bucks' He was grinning, seeing Sammy's fear 'Man! Could some guy take a swing at your wrist with an axe!'

'Cut it out!' Johnny snapped, his voice dangerous 'No one's swinging no axes'

There was a sudden silence as Massino came into the office.

'All set?' Massino asked Andy

'They're on their way'

'Well. ' Massino grinned at Johnny. 'So . . '

Johnny waited, his face expressionless.

'Last round-up, huh?' Massino said 'You're going to do fine with the bandits, Johnny' He looked at Sammy 'You're going to do fine as my chauffeur Okay, get moving The Big Take!' He went to his desk and sat down

As Toni and Ernie, followed by Sammy, moved to the door, Massino said, 'Johnny?'

Johnny paused

'You got that goddamn medal on?' Massino was grinning

'I'm never without it, Mr Joe'

Massino nodded 'Watch it! You could need it on this trip'

'We three will be watching it, Mr Joe,' Johnny said quietly

The four men left the office and walked down the stairs to Johnny's car

Five hours later, it was over There had been no trouble The police looked the other way when Johnny double parked, slowing the flow of traffic Money rolled into the bags Sammy, expecting to hear any second the bang of a gun and to feel a bullet smash into his body, was almost gibbering by the time Johnny pulled up outside Massino's office block

Johnny touched him on his shoulder

'Finished,' he said quietly 'Now the Rolls'

But Sammy still didn't feel safe He had to cross the sidewalk, dragging the heavy bags before he finally reached the haven of Massino's office

With Johnny at his side and Ernie and Toni, fanned out, their hands gripping their gun butts, he got out of the car and into the rain

He cringed at the crowd waiting around the entrance to the office block to cheer the four men as they arrived

Then the blessed dimness of the lobby and the ride up in the elevator

'How does it feel, boy, to be carrying all that dough?' Toni asked

Sammy looked at him, then away He was thinking that tomorrow he would be really safe, fitted with a grey uniform, wearing a peaked cap with a black cockade and at the wheel of a Corniche Rolls After ten years of fear, he had come through without being shot at and without having his hand chopped off and now he was heading for pastures green

With Johnny at his side, he shambled into Massino's office and set down the two heavy bags on Massino's desk

Andy was there, waiting Massino was chewing a dead cigar As Andy unlocked the handcuff, Massino lifted his eyebrows at Johnny It was a silent question 'No trouble?' Johnny shook his head

Then came the ritual while Andy counted the money. It took some time. Finally, Andy looked at Massino and pursing his thin lips said, 'This is the tops, Mr Joe one hundred and eighty-six thousand. Some take!'

Johnny felt a rush of hot blood down his spine. The jackpot! In a few hours this enormous sum of money would be his! A thirty-footer? He would now be able to make new plans. A forty-five-footer now came into his mind.

He watched Andy tug the two bags into his office and after a moment or so, he heard the old-fashioned safe door clang shut.

Massino took from his desk drawer a bottle of Johnny Walker. Ernie produced glasses. Massino poured himself a generous shot, then offered the bottle to Johnny.

'Go ahead,' Massino said. 'You're my boy, Johnny. Twenty years! I wanted you to be in on the biggest take.' He leaned back, grinning. 'Now, you've got a career ahead of you.'

Ernie poured the rest of the drinks. Sammy refused. There was a pause while the men toasted themselves, then the telephone bell started up and Massino waved them away.

As Johnny and Sammy walked down the stairs, Sammy said, 'It's been tough, Mr Johnny, and I'm sorry you and me won't work together no more. You've been good to me. You've helped me. I want to say thanks.'

'Let's go drink beer,' Johnny said and as he walked into the rain, he felt the spray of the sea against his face and the lurch of a forty-five-footer beneath his feet.

They drank beer in the dimness of Freddy's bar.

'I guess this is goodbye, Sammy,' Johnny said as Sammy waved to the barman for a second round. 'You see, nothing ever happened all these years. You were scared about nothing.'

'I guess,' Sammy shook his head. 'There are folk who always worry and folk who don't. You're lucky, Mr Johnny. You don't ever seem to worry.'

Johnny thought of the steal. Worry? No! After all he was over forty half way to death. Even if the steal turned sour, he could tell himself when the crunch came that at least he had tried to achieve an ambition. But the steal wasn't going to turn sour. There would be no crunch.

Out in the rain, the two men—one white, the other black—looked at each other. There was an awkward pause, then Johnny offered his hand.

'Well, so long, Sammy,' he said. 'We'll keep in touch.'

They gripped hands.

'Keep saving your money,' Johnny went on. 'I'll be around. Anytime, anywhere if you want to yak. . . you know.'

Sammy's eyes grew misty.

'I know, Mr Johnny I'm your friend remember, Mr Johnny I'm your friend'

Johnny gave him a light punch on his chest, then walked away. As he walked he felt a shutter was closing down, cutting off a slice of his life. The clang of the shutter in his mind warned him that he was now even more out on his own.

Driving slowly, he reached his apartment at 17 20, climbed the stairs and let himself in. He felt in need of a drink, but he resisted it. No alcohol. He had to be sharp for this job. No whisky to make him feel reckless. He thought of the hours ahead: the dinner with Melanie, the slow creeping minutes. He went to the window and looked down on the narrow, traffic-congested street, then he stripped off and took a shower, put on his best suit and then looked at his watch. It was now 18 00. God! he thought, when waiting, how time crawled!

He checked the things he would need: a weighted rubber cosh, a folded newspaper, a pair of gloves, his cigarette lighter, the key to the safe and the left-luggage locker key. All these he laid out on the table. There was nothing else he needed except luck. He put his fingers inside his shirt and touched the St Christopher medal. In two years' time, he told himself, he would be at sea with the spokes of a tiller in his hands, steering a forty-five-footer into the bay with the sun on his face and the roar of powerful motors making the deck tremble.

Sitting before the window, he listened to the noise of the street floating up to him, the sound of the traffic and the kids yelling until the hands of his watch crawled to 19 30. Then he got to his feet, slid the cosh into his hip pocket, strapped on his gun harness, checked his 38, took the newspaper into the bathroom and damped it under the tap before putting it into his jacket pocket, put the two keys and the gloves in another pocket and he was ready to go.

He drove to Melanie's apartment, arriving there just on 20 00. She was waiting in the doorway and got into the car as Johnny pulled up.

'Hi, baby!' He tried to make his voice sound casual. 'Everything okay?'

'Yes.' Her tone was flat. He could see she was uneasy and he hoped to God she hadn't changed her mind.

The meal wasn't a success although Johnny extravagantly ordered lobster cocktails and turkey breasts done in hot chili sauce. Neither of them did more than pick at the food. Johnny couldn't help thinking of the moment when he would have to tackle Benno. The business of rushing the two heavy bags across to the Greyhound station. He would have to leave the operation until after 02 00: between 02.00 and 03 00. Everything depended

on luck and putting down his fork, he touched the St Christopher medal through his shirt

'I wish you would tell me what you are going to do, Johnny,' Melanie said suddenly. She pushed her turkey away, only half eaten. 'It worries me so. It's nothing bad, is it?'

'A job. Forget it, baby. You don't want to know anything about it. It's the best way. You want coffee?'

'No.'

'Let's go to a movie. Come on, baby, snap out of it. It's going to be all right.'

Going to a movie was a good idea. It had grip and even Johnny forgot what he was going to do in a few hours' time. They returned to Melanie's apartment just after midnight and went up the stairs.

On the stairs, they ran into a girl who had an apartment opposite Melanie's. They paused to have a word. The girl knew Johnny and got on well with Melanie.

'Out of cigarettes!' she said. 'My luck!'

This chance meeting pleased Johnny. Just in case anything turned sour, this girl could say he was with Melanie.

The girl went on down the stairs and Melanie and Johnny went on up. Johnny had left his car parked outside the entrance and the girl would see it.

'Want coffee?' Melanie asked, dropping her coat on the settee.

'A lot of it, baby,' Johnny sat down. 'I don't leave here for a couple of hours. I've got to stay awake.'

After a while, she came back with a large pot of coffee, a cup and saucer which she set down on the table beside him.

'Thanks, baby, now you go to bed,' Johnny said. 'There's nothing to worry about. Go to bed. go to sleep.'

She stood hesitating, looking at him, then silently she went into the bedroom and shut the door. Johnny grimaced as he poured strong, black coffee into the cup.

He sat there, sipping coffee until 02.25, then he got to his feet and moving silently, he opened the bedroom door and looked into the darkness of the room.

'You going now?' Melanie asked out of the darkness, her voice quavering.

'Why aren't you asleep, for God's sake?'

'I can't sleep. I'm so worried, Johnny.'

Women! he thought. Maybe he should have picked on someone else for his alibi. He shook his head in despair. What the hell was the matter with him? He wouldn't need an alibi! The way he had fixed this, Massino would never think he had taken the money.

'I'll be back in thirty minutes, baby. Take it easy. . . try to sleep,' and he closed the door.

He left the apartment and walked down to the deserted street. Keeping in the shadows, he walked fast, heading for Massino's office.

It took him ten minutes of fast walking to reach the entrance of Massino's office block. He approached it from across the street and he saw a light on in Andy's office. That meant Benno was up there, either sleeping or smoking or doing some goddamn thing, while he kept watch.

Johnny looked to right and left. The street was deserted. He crossed the street, entered the dimly lit lobby and took the elevator to the fourth floor. Closing the elevator door gently, he walked up the two remaining flights to Massino's office.

The job had to be done fast so his alibi would stand up. Reaching the passage leading to Massino's and Andy's offices, he took out his handkerchief and removed the two electric light bulbs in the corridor. The stream of light coming through Andy's glazed door was enough for him to see. He took the newspaper from his pocket. It was still slightly damp. He paused for a moment to listen, then he crumpled the newspaper and put it down hard against Andy's office door. He lit his lighter and touched off the newspaper. Small flames made smoke. Johnny stood back, cosh in hand, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. He heard a muttered curse, then the door was unlocked and Benno, squat, heavily built, stood in the doorway, gazing at the smouldering paper. Johnny waited, pressed against the wall.

Benno moved forward as Johnny knew he would. As he began to stamp on the smouldering newspaper, Johnny's cosh descended on the back of his head.

Johnny didn't pause to make certain he had put Benno away. He knew he had and there was no point in wasting seconds. He stepped to the safe, took the key from his pocket and opened the safe. He dragged out the two bags. Sweat was running down his face. The bags were a lot heavier than he had expected. Taking the key safe, carrying the bags, he stepped over Benno's inert body, paused for a brief moment to stamp out the smouldering newspaper, then thumbed the elevator button.

Descending to the ground floor, he looked cautiously into the deserted lobby, then carrying a bag in either gloved hand, he moved into the street.

Again he paused, then satisfied he had the street to himself, he bolted across to the Greyhound bus station.

A big negro was sleepily brushing up and he didn't look at Johnny as he opened the locker. As Johnny heaved the bags into the locker, he heard a late bus start up and saw its headlights as it moved out on to the street. He had to shove hard to get the

door shut. He turned the key, removed it and then walked out of the bus station.

The first move of the operation had jelled! He ducked down a side street and began to run \$186,000! There was a surge of triumph in him as he ran. It now couldn't turn sour! Massino would never suspect him! As he ran, he felt a strong, overpowering sexual need.

Darting through the back streets, deserted at this time of night, he finally reached Melanie's apartment block. He paused in the shadows, checking, making sure that no one was there to break his alibi, then moving fast, he entered the apartment block and took the elevator to Melanie's floor.

Again he paused in the elevator to make sure there was no one in the passage, then he darted across to Melanie's door, turned the handle and was in.

He leaned against the door. His heart thumping. Well, he had done it. He looked at his watch. The steal had taken twenty-five minutes!

'Johnny!'

Melanie, in her shortie nightdress, came into the living-room.

He forced a grin.

'Here I am, like I said, nothing to worry about.'

She stared at him, her black eyes wide with fear.

'What happened?'

'I said not to worry.' He took her in his arms. 'But something's going to happen right now, guess what?'

Picking her up, he carried her into the bedroom and laid her gently on the bed.

'It's okay, baby,' he said, stripping off his jacket, dumping his gun harness and then pulling off his shirt. Maybe the tension of the past half hour was getting at him, but he wanted her as never before.

She lay still, staring at him.

'You and me, this time it's going to be the best,' he said as he was pulling the zipper of his trousers, he suddenly felt horribly naked.

He stood motionless, looking down at her, feeling his raging desire for her like a flame hit by a bucketful of water.

'Your medal,' Melanie said.

Johnny straightened. He looked down at his hairy chest. The St Christopher medal no longer hung on its silver chain. With shaking hands he lifted the chain and saw the tiny hook that carried the medal was bent and open.

For the first time in his life, he felt a cold clutch of fear.

'Look for it!' The snap of his voice and the expression in his eyes brought Melanie off the bed. Together they searched the bed-

room, then the living-room, but the medal wasn't in the apartment

He ran into the bedroom, struggled into his shirt, put on his holster, then his jacket

Melanie said fearfully, 'What is it, Johnny? Tell me!'

'Go to bed wait for me,' and he left the apartment. He paused to search the corridor, then the cage of the elevator no medal. He rode down to the lobby, searched that, then went out on to the street. He was shaking now. He paused to drag down lungfuls of damp air as he tried to control his rising panic.

This was no way to act, he told himself. Where had he dropped the medal? Unlocking his car, he searched around the driver's seat. . . no medal.

He relocked the car and stood thinking. It could have dropped anywhere, but if it had dropped in Andy's office, he was cooked. God! Was he cooked! All his plans, his confident two-year wait before he bought the boat would be shrivelled in the heat that Massino would turn on. Leaving his medal in Andy's office was like leaving a signed confession that he had taken the money!

There was still a chance. He started to his car, then stopped. Think straight, you fool! he told himself. It could still be all right. Leave the car. It's part of your alibi!

He started down the street in a shambling run, covered the same ground, moving down the back streets, deserted but for a stray cat or an old drunk, sleeping in the doorway.

He had to make sure the medal wasn't in Andy's office. It didn't matter if it were found in the elevator, in Massino's office, but it would be fatal if it were found in Andy's office because no one except Andy and Benno were ever allowed into the office.

Breathing heavily, Johnny reached the corner of the street that led directly to Massino's office block. He came to an abrupt stop as he saw a police prowler car parked outside the office block.

Too late!

Benno had recovered and had alerted the fuzz and even as Johnny stood there in the shadows, he saw a Lincoln pull up and from it spilled Toni and Ernie who chased into the building.

Where had he dropped the medal?

As long as you wear it nothing really bad can happen to you

He was no longer wearing it and he was superstitious enough to be certain that the medal was lying in front of the safe. a signed confession that he had taken the money! He looked across at the Greyhound station. He hadn't the nerve to go there, to take the two heavy bags and lug them back to his car. Toni or Ernie might look out of the window, down into the street and spot him. Anyway, now he dare not use his car. All the mob knew it by sight. He would have to go on the run. If he acted fast, he could make it

The money would be safe in the locker. He would wait until the heat cooled off, then sneak back, get the money and sneak out. He knew he was thinking like an idiot, but panic had its grip on him.

With screaming sirens, more police cars arrived. Then as Johnny stood against the wall, watching, his heart hammering, Massino's Rolis swept to the kerb. He watched Massino get out of his car and walk fast across the sidewalk and into the building.

He had to get out of town and fast, Johnny thought. Money? He must have money if he was to keep one jump ahead of Massino. He thought of all that money stashed away in the locker. No use to him right now. He had to have an immediate get-away stake.

Melanie? She never had any money. His mind raced. Maybe he was panicking for nothing. The medal could be anywhere, but in his bones, he was sure it was in Andy's office.

Sammy!

Sammy had three thousand dollars under his bed. Johnny had to have money! He couldn't hide from Massino without money.

He began to run down the back streets. It was a long run. Sammy's pad was half way across the town. The City's clock was striking the half hour as Johnny, panting, started up the stairs that led to Sammy's fourth-floor pad. He knocked on Sammy's door, but there was no answer. He listened, knocked again, then turned the handle. The door swung open.

'Sammy?'

His fingers groped and found the light switch and snapped it down.

The tiny room held a truckle bed, a two-ringed gas cooker, an armchair, a battered TV set, but no Sammy. Then Johnny remembered Sammy always shacked up with his girl, Cloe, on Friday nights.

He moved into the room and shut the door. Kneeling, he groped under the bed and found a small steel box in which Sammy had told him he kept his savings. He pulled the box out. It wasn't even locked! Lifting the lid he saw the box was crammed with ten dollar bills. He didn't hesitate, acutely aware that every second he wasted decreased his chances of escape.

He stuffed his pockets with the bills, leaving the box empty. For a brief moment he wondered how Sammy would react, then he told himself he was only borrowing the money. In a short while, he would repay Sammy with interest.

Leaving the room, he started down the stairs. Now to get out of town! He wondered how long the fuzz would take to set up road blocks. Here was the danger, but he had to get out! His fingers touched the butt of his .38. If he had to, he would shoot his way out!

Moving into the street, his mind raced. He had to have a hide-

out! Somewhere where he could be completely lost for at least a month. Where could he go? Then he thought of Giovanni Fuselli. It was an inspired thought. Fuselli had been Johnny's father's best friend. He must be over seventy now. Maybe he was dead! Johnny had heard from him five years ago. He had been living in a small town—what the hell was its name? Jackson? Packson? Jackson! It was on the freeway to Miami. If he could get there, he was sure Fuselli would shelter him.

He would have to steal a car. If he could get to Reddy's café where all the south-bound truckers stopped for a meal, he could bribe one of them to take him to Jackson.

He stood hesitatingly as he looked up and down the street. There were a number of cars parked. As he started towards them, he saw the headlights of a car swing into the street and he stepped back into the shadows. The car came slowly towards him, then pulled up by the kerb and immediately under a street light. A young, thin man with shoulder-length hair got out of the car. The street light showed Johnny his shabbiness: tattered jeans and a dirty sweat shirt. Acting on impulse and as the young man was locking the car door, Johnny stepped up to him.

'Want to earn twenty bucks?' Johnny asked quietly.

The young man stared at him.

'Doing what?'

'Drive me to Reddy's café.'

'Hey, man! That's twenty miles out of town.'

'At a dollar a mile, is that so rough?'

The young man grinned.

'You've got yourself a deal. Let's have the bread and we're on our way.'

Johnny gave him a ten-dollar bill.

'You get the rest when we get there.'

Fine. I'm Joey. Who are you, buster?'

'Charlie,' Johnny said. 'Let's go.' He waited until Joey had unlocked the car door, then got into the passenger's seat. Joey slid under the driving wheel.

'Listen, Joey, keep to the back streets. Drive fast, but not too fast. get it?'

Joey laughed. 'Like that, huh? The fuzz bothering you?'

'You don't earn twenty bucks flapping with your mouth,' Johnny said quietly. The cold menace in his voice made Joey stiffen. 'Just drive.'

At least, Johnny thought, this punk knows the City. Although it took longer, Joey kept to the back streets and in ten minutes or so they approached the freeway out of the City.

This was where trouble could be waiting, Johnny thought and he eased his gun in its holster for a quick draw. But there was no

trouble Johnny wasn't to know that road blocks were set up thirty minutes after he had left the City

The Police Commissioner had been out of town and the Assistant Police Commissioner had no time for Massino. He was deliberately unco-operative, delaying the road blocks, throwing his rank at Massino, pointing out that the Numbers gamble was illegal anyway

Massino, raging, now regretted he hadn't taken care of the Assistant Police Commissioner as he had taken care of his boss with a new car every year, money to take care of his goddamn kids' education and a big insurance policy to take care of his goddamn wife

Johnny paid Joey off, watched him drive away, then walked into Reddy's café to find a trucker who would drive him south

His panic was slowly subsiding So far so good

Now for Jackson and a safe hide-away

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SHRILLING of the telephone bell brought Joe Massino instantly awake. He snapped on the bedside lamp, looked at the clock that told him it was 03 15 and knew immediately that something had happened. No one would dare disturb his sleep unless there was an emergency.

He snatched up the receiver and swung his feet to the floor, stripping the blanket and sheet off his wife, Dina, who was coming awake with a low, moaning sound.

'Yeah?'

Massino's voice boomed over the line.

'Boss this is Benno. The dough's gone. I've got a cracked nut. What do I do, boss?'

Massino knew Benno's limitations. He was a punch drunk, a goddamn moron, but at least he had got the message across. Massino felt a hot wave of murderous rage sweep through him, but he controlled it.

'Call the cop house, Benno,' he said. 'Get them with you. I'm on my way.' He slammed down the receiver and began to strip off his pyjamas.

Dina, a blonde, heavily built woman, some fifteen years younger than her husband was now awake.

'What is it, for God's sake? What are you doing?'

'Shut up!' Massino snarled.

He shoved his legs into his trousers and not bothering for a tie, he struggled into his jacket.

'That's a nice way to talk' She hauled up the blanket and sheet and covered herself 'Can't you act like a human?'

Massino left the bedroom, slamming the door after him. He hesitated for a moment, then going into his study he called Andy Lucas. He waited a long minute before Andy's voice came on the line.

'The money's been snatched' Massino told him 'Get over there get the boys,' and he hung up.

Going down to the garage, he got into the Rolls and began the three-mile haul across the City to his down town office.

As he pulled up outside the office block, he saw a prowler car and Toni's Lincoln parked by the kerb. Well, at least he was getting some action, he thought as he rode up to the sixth floor in the elevator. There were two cops standing around looking vague. They stiffened to attention when they saw Massino. Both cops worked in Massino's district and were well looked after. They saluted as Massino stormed into Andy's office.

Benno was sitting on a chair, blood on his face, his eyes glazed. Toni stood by the window. Ernie stood by the open safe.

'What happened?' Massino demanded, coming to rest before Benno who made an effort to stand up but promptly sat down again.

'There was a fire, boss,' he mumbled and his hand went to his head. 'I opened up and there was a newspaper burning. While I was putting it out, I got clubbed.'

'Who did it?' Massino barked.

'I dunno. Didn't see no one. Just got clubbed.'

Massino went to the safe, looked inside, looked at the lock, then went to the telephone.

He dialled a number while Ernie, Toni, Benno and the two cops watched him.

'I want Cullen,' he said when a woman's sleepy voice answered. 'This is Massino.'

'Oh, Mr Massino!' The woman's voice came fully awake. 'Jack is out of town. He's attending a conference in New York.'

Massino cursed and slammed down the receiver. He took out an address book from his wallet, checked a number and dialled. Assistant Police Commissioner Fred Zatski answered. He sounded outraged to be woken at this hour.

'Who the hell is this?'

'Massino. Listen, I want this goddamn town sewn up fast. Road blocks, the railroad station, the bus station and the airport. I've had a \$186,000 steal and the bastard will try to get out of town. Get moving! Hear me! Seal the whole goddamn town!'

'Just who do you imagine you're talking to?' Zatski bellowed. 'Alert headquarters! Don't bother me! And listen, Massino, you

may imagine you're someone in this town, but to me, you're just a bladder of wind,' and he hung up

Massino's face turned purple with rage. He yelled at the two cops, 'Get moving, you hunkheads! Get someone who can do something here . . . hear me!'

As O'Brien, the older of the two, jumped to the telephone, Andy Lucas came in. He had obviously come in a hurry. He was wearing a jacket and trousers over his pyjamas.

He looked into the safe, then at the lock, then met Massino's enraged eyes.

'It's an inside job,' he said. 'He'll try to run. He had a key.'

'You telling me?' Massino snarled. 'Think I'm blind! Cullen's out of town and this bastard Zatski won't play!'

O'Brien said, 'Excuse me, Mr Massino, lieutenant Mulligan with the squad is on his way.'

Massino looked around the room like an enraged bull hunting for a target.

'Where's Johnny? I want my best man around me!'

'He didn't answer when I called him,' Andy said. 'He's not at home.'

'I want him here!' Massino pointed at Toni. 'Don't stand around like a goddamn dummy. Get Johnny!'

As Toni left the office, Andy said quietly, 'We'd better talk, Mr Joe.'

Massino snorted. He nodded at Ernie.

'Get Benno to hospital,' and leaving the office he crossed the passage, unlocked his office door and went in, followed by Andy.

He sat down at his desk and stared at Andy who sat on the corner of the desk.

'We're in trouble,' Andy said. 'At midday we have to pay out or there'll be a riot. We've got to borrow the money, Mr Joe, or we're sunk. If the newspapers get hold of this the Numbers will come under the limelight and Cullen will also be in trouble.'

'So?'

'Tanza is our only chance. It'll cost, but we've got to go to him.'

Massino clenched his big fists but he knew Andy was talking sense. The wail of a police siren sounded.

'You handle Mulligan,' he said. 'Get the town sealed off. I'll talk to Tanza.'

'Whoever took the money is out of town by now,' Andy said, 'but we'll go through the motions.' He went out, closing the door.

Massino pulled the telephone towards him, hesitated, then dialled a number. As he did so, he looked at his desk clock. The time now was 04.25.

Carlo Tanza was the head man of the Mafia cell in town. He was just one of the many arms of the Mafia octopus. a man of

power, to whom Massino paid a weekly cut on his Numbers racket, his loan shark service and his vice earnings

Tanza answered the telephone himself. He, like Massino, had come immediately awake, knowing no telephone bell would ring in his big, opulent house at this hour unless there was an emergency and Tanza's needle-sharp brain was always geared to meet an emergency.

He listened to what Massino had to say and produced a solution without hesitation.

'Okay, Joe. Don't worry about the money. By ten o'clock you'll have it for the pay-out. We'll keep the press out of this.' A pause. 'It'll cost you Twenty-five per cent, but you've got to have it, so you've got to pay for it.'

'Hey! Now wait!' Massino did sums in his head. 'This steal would cost him \$46,000 out of his own pocket! You can't screw me that hard. I'll pay fifteen.'

'Twenty-five,' Tanza said. 'The money in your office at ten. You couldn't get it anywhere else. Now, who did it?'

'All I know it was an inside job,' Massino said. 'It's just happened. I'll find out who did it, you can bet your life on that! I'm having the town sealed off, but the chances are the bastard's out by now.'

'As soon as you know, tell me,' Tanza said. 'I'll turn the organization after him. Just let me know his name and we'll find him.'

'Yeah. It must be one of my punks. Well, thanks, Carlo. I knew I could rely on you.' A pause, 'How about twenty per cent?'

Tanza chuckled.

'You're a tryer, Joe. I have to work by rule. If it was me I'd let you have it for ten, but this will be New York money and it comes pricey,' and he hung up.

Massino sat for a long moment, his face ugly with rage. Then, shoving back his chair, he strode out into the passage and into Andy's office.

Lieutenant Mulligan, a fat, freckled-faced man was examining the safe. Two other plain-clothes detectives were finger printing. Benno and Ernie had gone. Andy stood just inside the doorway, nibbling his thumb nail.

'The road blocks are going up, Mr Massino,' Mulligan said. 'If he hasn't got away by now, he won't get away.'

Knowing some thirty vital minutes had been wasted, Massino glared at the detective and then spat on the floor.

Toni Capello had been told to find Johnny. As he got into his Lincoln, he decided that the most likely place where Johnny would be found was with his girl friend, Melanie.

Toni envied Johnny. This lush, well-built girl was his idea of

a good lay He thought it would be fun to batter on the door and get Johnny out of bed Who knows? The girl might even come to the door herself

He knew her name and where she lived Once, he had spotted Johnny and the girl leave a restaurant and because he had the hots for her and nothing better to do, he had followed them back to Melanie's pad

It took him only a few minutes to reach the street and he saw Johnny's car parked outside the apartment block He grinned as he pulled up behind the car

So Johnny was up there with his whore, Toni thought as he crossed the sidewalk Man! Was he in for a shock!

He rode up in the elevator Reaching Melanie's front door, he dug his fingers into the bell push and kept it there

There was a long delay, then the door jerked open

Melanie, holding a cotton wrap around her, stared at him, terror in her eyes

'What is it?' she demanded, her voice strident

What goes on? Toni wondered This chick's flipping her lid

'I want Johnny get him out of bed! The boss wants him pronto'

'He's not here!' Melanie began to shut the door, but Toni's foot came forward, blocking it

'He is here, baby Don't fool around His car's outside He's wanted' Then raising his voice, he yelled, 'Hey, Johnny! The boss wants you!'

'I tell you he's not here!' Melanie cried 'Get out! He's not here!'

'Is that right?' Toni moved forward, pushing her back 'Then where is he?'

'I don't know!'

'His car's outside'

'I tell you I don't know!' She waved imploring hands to the door 'Go away get out!'

Suspicion lit a spark in Toni's mind Why was she so frightened? Why was Johnny's car outside if he wasn't here?

Shoving her aside, he went into the bedroom and turned on the light He looked around, then saw Johnny's tie on the floor

'He's been here,' he said as Melanie, shaking, came to the bedroom door 'Where did he go?'

'I don't know! I don't know anything! Get out!'

Jesus! Toni thought, it couldn't have been Johnny? Not Johnny!

He caught hold of her wrist, swung her around and flung her down on the bed He bent over her

'Talk, baby, or I'll soften you Where's he gone?'

Shuddering, Melanie tried to sit up. Toni placed his hand over her face and flung her back, then he repeated, 'Where is he?'

'I don't know,' Melanie sobbed.

He slapped her twice, jerking her head from side to side.

'Where is he?' he yelled at her. 'Come on, baby, spill it!'

She lay stunned by the force of the slaps.

'I don't know,' she mumbled, trying to shield her face. 'I don't know anything!'

Toni hesitated. He was almost sure she was lying, but to knock Johnny Bianda's girl about could be asking for real trouble if he was making a mistake.

If Johnny suddenly walked in and caught him with this chick, Johnny would kill him. Toni had no doubt about that.

'Get your clothes on,' he said. 'You and me are going for a ride. Come on!'

'I won't go with you! Get out!' Melanie screamed. Then sliding down the bed away from him, she was on her feet and out into the sitting-room before he could stop her.

Cursing, Toni rushed after her, caught her at the front door and dragged her back into the bedroom. He pulled his gun and shoved the barrel into her chest.

'Get dressed!' he snarled.

She looked with horror at the gun, then he had no more trouble with her.

Twenty minutes later, he led her into Massino's office.

'Something stinks here, boss,' he said as Massino glared first at him and then at Melanie. 'Maybe you can talk to her.' He went on to tell Massino about Johnny's car, about Melanie's terror and no Johnny.

'What are you trying to tell me?' Massino snarled. 'You telling me Johnny took the money?'

'I'm telling you nothing. She'll tell you.'

Massino turned his bloodshot, enraged eyes on Melanie who shrivelled under his glare.

'Where's Johnny?'

She began to sob helplessly.

'I don't know. He went out on a job—that's what he called it. Don't touch me! He told me I was to be his alibi. He lost his medal.'

Massino drew a long slow breath.

'Sit down,' he said. 'Here, Toni, give her a chair.' Then he began to question Melanie who talked, terrified by the staring bloodshot eyes and the fat, stone-hard face.

'Okay,' Massino said finally. 'Take her home, Toni,' and getting up he went into Andy's office where Lieutenant Mulligan was about to leave. Massino drew him aside. 'I want you to pick up

Johnny Bianda,' he said 'Tuin every goddamn cop you've got on the job Keep it quiet understand'

Mulligan gaped at him

'Bianda? You think he's behind this?'

Massino grinned like a wolf

'I don't know, but if you can't find him in four or five hours, he could be Drop everything get after Bianda!'

At 10 00, Carlo Tanza arrived in a Cadillac with three bodyguards With a wide, oily smile he watched them dump two heavy suitcases on Massino's desk

Tanza was a short, stocky Italian with a balding head, a big paunch, tiny, evil eyes and lips like red wire

He shook hands with Massino, waved his men out of the office, nodded to Andy who stayed to count the money, then sat down

'There's the money, Joe,' he said 'You ask, you get How's that for service?'

Massino nodded 'Thanks'

'The boss talked to me on the phone,' Tanza said 'He wasn't pleased If you want to hold on to your Numbers, Joe, you have got to wake up your ideas This safe'

'I'm getting a new one'

'I guessed you would Now, who took the money?'

'Nothing certain yet,' Massino said, 'but it points to Johnny Bianda He's gone missing'

'Bianda?' Tanza looked startled 'I got the idea he was your best man'

'Yeah' Massino's face turned red and his little eyes glittered, 'but it points to him,' and he went on to tell Tanza about Melanie, the alibi and the fact Johnny's car was still parked outside Melanie's pad

'You're sure the girl knows nothing?'

'I'm sure I scared the crap out of the bitch'

'So what are you going to do?'

Massino closed his big hands into fists

'If he's skipped town, I want the organization to go after him If he's still in town, I'll find him'

'He can buy himself a lot of protection with all that dough,' Tanza said thoughtfully 'Okay, I'll tell the Big Man So you want us to find him right?'

'If he's not holed up here yes'

'I don't want to start something too soon, Joe Once the organization gets moving its hard to stop and it costs Suppose you make certain he isn't in town, then give me the green light, huh?'

'If he's skipped, the longer you wait the further he'll go'

Tanza grinned evilly

'It don't matter how far he goes if he goes to China, we'll find him. We've never failed yet. You make sure first he isn't in town, then we'll take over.' He got to his feet. 'I'm only trying to save you money, Joe. We don't work for nothing.'

When Tanza had gone, Massino called Toni and Einie into the office.

'Go to Johnny's place and search it,' he ordered. 'I want every scrap of information, every scrap of paper you can find there. I want you to send out some of the boys to ask around. I want to know who his friends are.'

When they had left, Massino called Lieutenant Mulligan.

'Anything new?' he asked when the Lieutenant came on the line. 'It's my bet he's skipped town,' Mulligan said. 'There's no trace of him. I've dug up his record, his prison photo and his fingerprints. Would they be of any use to you?'

'Yeah. I want everything you've got on him.'

'I'll send a man over with the photostats right away, Mr. Massino.'

'Would you know if he has any relatives?'

'Doesn't seem to from his record. His father died five years ago.'

'Anything on him?'

'An Italian worked in a fruit cannery in Tampa. Johnny was born there.'

Massino thought for a moment.

A dog to its vomit. He could be heading back South.

'Yeah. Do you want me to alert the Florida police? I can do.'

Massino hesitated, then said, 'No. I can handle this, but keep hunting for him in town.' A pause, then Massino said, 'The next time you're passing look in and see Andy. He'll have something for you.'

As Mulligan began mumbling thanks, Massino hung up.

At 1900, Massino was still at his desk. Spread out before him were the various items that Mulligan had sent him and that Toni and Ernie had found in Johnny's apartment.

Andy hovered behind him, chain smoking, but quiet. He could feel the intensity of Massino's vicious fury that was only just under control.

'So what have we got?' Massino demanded suddenly.

'He's our man,' Andy said. 'No question about it now and he's skipped town.'

'Who the hell would have thought Johnny would have done this to me?' Massino asked, pushing back his chair. 'The sonofabitch! Well, okay, I'll turn the organization after him. It may take time, but they'll find him and then he'll wish he'd never been born!'

Andy came to the desk

'This interests me, Mr Joe,' he said and picked up a much thumbled copy of *Yachts & Motorboats*, a technical magazine for boat builders that Toni had found in Johnny's apartment. 'Why should Johnny have this?'

'How the hell should I know?' Massino snarled 'It means nothing!'

Andy was flicking through the pages, then he paused at an advert of a thirty-foot cabin cruiser that had been ringed by a pencil

'Look at this'

Massino glared at him 'So what?'

'Do you think Johnny is interested in boats? Do you think his plan was to skip in a boat?'

Massino became attentive 'Yeah another pointer to the South'

'And this' Andy picked up a gaudy Christmas card that Toni had also found. Written in a spidery handwriting was the legend

See you sometime

Giovanni Fuselli

Jackson

'Where the hell is Jackson and what's so important about this goddamn thing?'

'Jackson is around thirty miles from Jacksonville, Florida'

Then the telephone bell rang. Ernie was on the line

'Got something, boss,' he said, his voice excited 'Just been talking to a young punk who says he gave a ride to a guy who matches up with Bianda's description. He dropped him off at Reddy's café'

'Get him over here. I'll show him Bianda's photo.' Massino hung up, then looked at Andy 'Looks like Johnny got a ride out of town to Reddy's café that's where the truckers stop before driving South, isn't it?'

'That's right'

'South!' Massino said 'It all points south, doesn't it? That's where the bastard's gone!'

Fifteen minutes later, Ernie, accompanied by Joey, looking uneasy, came into the office

Massino pushed the photo across the desk

'That him?'

Joey peered at the photo, then nodded

'Yes, sir'

'Okay' Massino took out his wallet, found a five-dollar bill and tossed it at Joey 'Get his name and address,' he said to Ernie, 'and get him out of here.'

to Jackson and check this Fuselli out first? If he's our man, we save ourselves \$93,000. If he's in the clear and Bianda isn't there, then we turn it over to Tanza. We lose a few days, but we can afford to do that. What do you think?

Massino considered this, then nodded.

'Now you're using your head, Andy,' he said. 'Okay, get those two off by the first plane. Let's take a look at Fuselli.'

Ernie and Toni arrived at Jacksonville airport some minutes after 11 00. They went immediately to Hertz Rent-a-car bureau and hired a Chevy. While waiting for the car, Ernie asked the girl the best way to Jackson.

'Follow the freeway to your right,' he was told. 'No problem. Jackson is sign-posted around thirty miles from here.'

Ernie got in the passenger's seat. When he could avoid any form of work, he did so. After all, Toni was five years his junior, was his reasoning, so why the hell shouldn't he do the driving?

On the freeway, he said, 'Let's get this organized, Toni. If we run into Johnny, you take care of him and I'll take care of Fuselli, right?'

Toni stiffened.

'Where do you get this I take care of Johnny crap?'

Ernie hid a sly grin.

'That's what you want, isn't it? You've always said you could beat Johnny to a draw. Looks to me, we're heading for a showdown. This is your chance to prove you're better and faster with a gun than he is.'

Toni shifted uneasily. Johnny's past reputation had always hung over him like a dark cloud and was still hanging over him.

'Maybe both of us had better take care of him,' he said. 'That punk can shoot.'

'So can you,' Ernie relaxed. 'Didn't you tell me only last week that Johnny was old and washed up? You take care of him. This Fuselli might be as fast as Johnny.'

Toni felt sweat beads suddenly on his forehead.

'So that's fixed, huh?' Ernie said, enjoying himself. 'We shoot first and talk after, huh?'

Toni didn't say anything. He was aware of a tight ball of fear in his guts. He drove in silence for ten miles, then aware that Ernie was dozing off, he said. 'Do you think Johnny really took all that bread?'

'Why not?' Ernie shook himself awake and lit a cigarette. 'Boy! Could I use money like that! You know something, Toni? Johnny has more guts than you or me.'

'Maybe, but he can't get away with it. If we don't find him, the Big Man will. The bastard's stupid.'

'Maybe, but he's tried and that's more than you and me would have done. There's always a chance he just might get away with it.'

Toni glanced at his fat companion.

'You're nuts! No one has ever beaten the organization and no one ever will. If it takes years, they'll find him, if we don't.'

'But think of what he could do with all that bread even if he lasted only two years.'

'To hell with the money! I'd rather stay alive!'

'There's the sign post,' Ernie said. 'Jackson five miles.'

'I can read,' Toni said and the knot of fear in his guts tightened. Jackson turned out to be a tiny fruit-growing town with a Main street, a number of fruit-canning factories and outlying farms.

Toni drove down the Main street, passing a small, clean-looking hotel, the post office, a general store, a movie house and a café.

'What a goddamn hole,' he said as he pulled up outside the café. 'Let's have a beer. Maybe we can get a lead on Fuselli.'

They were aware that the people on the street, mostly old women and older men, were staring curiously at them. They went into the café, crossed to the bar and hoisted themselves up on stools.

There were a few old men sitting at tables, nursing glasses of beer, who gaped at them as if they were something out of a zoo.

The barman, fat, balding, with a friendly red face, came to them. 'Mornin' gents. What's your pleasure?'

'Beers,' Ernie said.

'Nice to see strangers in our town,' the barman went on as he drew beers. 'Harry Dukes is the name. Welcome, gents.'

In spite of his friendliness, Ernie could see Dukes was looking at them curiously as if trying to decide who and what they were. Toni's black-and-pink-flowered kipper tie seemed to be bothering him.

They drank, then Ernie said, 'Nice little town you have here.'

He always did the talking while Toni watched, listened and kept his mouth shut.

'Not so bad, and thank you. A bit quiet, but it could be worse. Lots of old people here, but in the evenings it livens up when the boys and girls come in from picking.'

'Yeah,' Ernie took out his wallet with a flourish and extracted a card he always carried around with him. The times this card had got him out of trouble and got him information were without number. He pushed the card across the counter.

'This for me?' Dukes asked startled.

'Just take a gander, friend.'

Duke went to the back of his bar and found a pair of spectacles. He put them on while Toni hissed softly under his breath. Ernie nudged him and Toni subsided.

Dukes read

THE ALERT DETECTIVE AGENCY

SAN FRANCISCO

Presented by Detective 1st Grade Jack Loosey

He looked up, removed his spectacles and gaped

'This you?' he asked, tapping the card

Yeah, and this is my assistant Detective Morgan,' Ernie said.

Dukes whistled softly. He was obviously impressed

'You know something? I had an idea there was something special about you two gents,' he said 'Detectives, huh?'

'Private,' Ernie said gravely 'Maybe you can help us'

Dukes took a step back. He began to look worried.

'Nothing in this little town for you, gents. I assure you'

'Have a drink and give us another beer'

Dukes hesitated, then drew three beers and stood, waiting

'We get all kinds of jobs,' Ernie said 'You've no idea. Does the name Giovanni Fuselli mean anything to you?'

'Sure does.' Then Dukes stiffened and his eyes turned hostile 'What's he to you?'

Ernie grinned slyly 'Nothing to me, Mr Dukes, but plenty to him. Does he live here?'

Dukes had now turned very hostile

'If you want to know anything about Mr Fuselli you go to the cops,' he said 'Mr Fuselli is a fine gentleman. You go to the cops. don't come here asking me questions.'

Ernie sipped his beer and then laughed

'You've got me all wrong, Mr Dukes. Our job is to find Mr Fuselli. We've been told what a fine man he is. We're trying to help him. Between you and me, a relative of his has left him some money. his aunt died last year and we're trying to clear up her estate.'

Dukes's hostility went away like a fist opening into a hand

'Is that right? Mr Fuselli has come into money?'

'He sure has. It's not my business to tell you how much,' Ernie winked confidently, 'but it's a nice slice. We've been told he lives around here, but we haven't his address. Like I said: we get all kinds of jobs. This is one of the nice ones.'

Listening, Toni marvelled at Ernie's glib talk and envied him. He knew he could never talk as convincingly as this.

'Well, I'm glad Mr Fuselli is a good friend of mine,' Dukes said 'Right now, he's away. What a shame! Left last week for a trip up north.'

Ernie slopped some of his beer

'Is that right? Do you know how long he'll be away?'

'No, sir Mr Fuselli goes north from time to time Sometimes he comes back in a week sometimes in a month, but he always comes back' Dukes grinned 'Just shuts up his little house and takes off'

'North? Where?'

Dukes shook his head 'Mr Fuselli never says He'll come in here, have a beer, then he says to me, "Well, Harry, I guess I'll go north for a while See you when I get back" Mr Fuselli never talks about himself and I don't ask questions'

Ernie lit a cigarette while he thought

'Doesn't someone look after his place while he's away?'

Dukes laughed 'Not much of a place to look after No, I guess no one goes near it It's in a pretty lonely spot'

'Just where is it?'

'Out on Hampton's hill You being a stranger here wouldn't know Hampton's hill, would you?'

Containing his impatience with an effort, Ernie agreed

'Well, you go down Main street, take the dirt road to your left, drive up the hill for a couple of miles and pass Noddy Jenkin's farm Then you go on for another mile and you'll see Mr Fuselli's place on your right a little clapboard house, but he keeps it nice'

'We'd better write to him,' Ernie said and finished his beer. 'The address is Hampton Hill, Jackson?'

'Yeah This is good news about him inheriting money An aunt? Jesus! She must have been old Mr Fuselli is pushing seventy'

Ernie gaped at him 'Seventy?'

'That's right He had his seventy-second birthday last month, but he's tough Make no mistake about that spry as a man half his age'

'Well, I guess we'll be getting along Nice meeting you, Mr Dukes'

After shaking hands, Ernie followed Toni out into the sunshine 'Canned stuff and bread and a bottle of Scotch'

'What the hell for?' Toni demanded

'Go get enough food to last us a couple of days,' Ernie said 'Can't you see all these old creeps are watching us?'

Toni went down the street to the general store while Ernie got into the passenger's seat of the car He pushed his hat over his eyes and rested

After a while Toni came back with a big bag of groceries and a bottle of Scotch He put the bag on the back seat, then got under the driving wheel

'So now what?'

'We go to Hampton Hill or whatever the hell it's called,' Ernie said

'Is that such a hot idea?'

'Use your nut We flew down here Johnny and Fuselli are diving down We have four or five hours start ahead of them It's my bet they'll bring the money here When they arrive, we'll be all over them before they know what's hit them, but we could have a wait

Toni thought about this, then grunted

'Okay'

Engaging gear, he drove fast along the broad road, lined on either side with trees heavy with oranges and headed for Hampton Hill

CHAPTER FIVE

A CUP OF COFFEE before him, Johnny sat at a small table and looked around the crowded café There was a steady roar of voices as long-haul truckers greeted each other, ate hamburgers, swigged numerous cups of coffee, then heaved themselves to their feet and went out into the pale sunshine as other truckers came in

Johnny glanced at his watch The time was 05 25 He had to get moving soon, he told himself, but up to now, he had held back as every trucker seemed to know every other trucker and he was uneasy about approaching a group of them He had tried one man who stood near him while waiting for ham and eggs, but the man shook his head

'No luck, pal No passengers against the Company's rules'

Then a powerfully-built man came in and Johnny noted with surprise no one greeted him This man went to the bar and ordered pancakes and syrup and coffee, then looked around for a seat

Johnny waved to him and carrying the plate of food, the big man came over and sat down

Johnny looked searchingly at him: an ex-boxer, he thought The flat nose and the scar tissues made this an easy guess The face was lined, worried and sullen and yet there was something likeable about this man

'Hi!' the man said as he set down the food 'Joe Davis This goddamn place is always over full'

'Al Bianco,' Johnny said

Davis began to eat while Johnny lit a cigarette Again he looked at his watch Time was moving along He wondered if Massino had alerted the organization or what he was doing

'Going south?' he asked

Davis glanced up 'Yeah You ain't trucking?'

'Looking for a ride,' Johnny said 'I pay my way Would you be going near Jacksonville?'

'Right through to Vero Beach ' Davis regarded Johnny, ate some more, then said, 'You're welcome It won't cost you a thing I welcome company '

'Thanks ' Johnny finished his coffee 'You reckon to take off soon?'

'As soon as I've got this junk down my throat It's a hell of a haul '

'I'll be outside, waiting ' Johnny said and got to his feet 'I'll get myself a wash '

After paying for his coffee, Johnny went into the toilet, washed his face and hands, then went out into the cool crisp air

He stood around, watching the big trucks take off and go roaring down the freeway What a hell of a job ' he thought Then his mind again switched to Massino He felt a little knot of fear He knew the organization had never failed to find their man, nor failed to kill him

There is always the first time, he told himself and grinned mirthlessly Who knows? He could make history The first man to beat the Mafia With the cold wind fanning his face, he felt confident Who knows?

Davis came out of the café and Johnny joined him They went across to an old, beaten-up truck full of empty orange crates

'Here she is,' Davis said 'A real bitch ' I've one more haul, then I get a new one if I'm lucky Man! Has this old cow done some mileage!'

He swung himself up into the cab Johnny went around and got into the passenger's seat The cab stank of sweat, oil and gas fumes The springs of his seat dug into his buttocks This was going to be one hell of a ride he thought

Davis started the motor As it came to life, there was a grinding noise as if something had come apart in the engine

'Don't worry about the noise,' Davis said, 'She's still got enough guts to get us south ' He rammed in the gear, then drove on to the freeway

Johnny felt the vibration of the protesting motor shake him from head to foot The roar of the motor made conversation impossible He braced himself, thinking of the miles ahead, but at least now he was moving into safety

'An old cow, huh? ' Davis shouted and grinned at Johnny

Johnny nodded

The two men sat silent as the tyres ate up the miles Trucks and cars roared by them

With sixty miles on the clock, the engine note suddenly changed and the din quietened

Davis looked at Johnny and grinned

'It takes this far for her to start to behave,' he said Johnny

could now hear him easily 'She hates work, but when she does work, she ain't all that bad'

Then he did something that shocked Johnny He clenched his fist and slammed it against his forehead He did this three times powerful blows that would have stunned most men

'Hey! For God's sake! You'll hurt yourself!' Johnny exclaimed.

Davis grinned

'Anything is better than the way my head aches Had this bitch of a headache for months A couple of bangs sets it right Forget it, Al, as I forget it'

'You suffer from headaches?' Johnny asked

'Oh, sure If you had been in my game, you'd have headaches too' Davis increased the speed of the truck 'Believe it or not, one time I was heavyweight contender for the crown' He grinned 'Never made it, but I was sparring partner for Ali at his greatest. Man! Did I have a ball!' He snorted 'All gone now All I've got is a nagging wife and this old truck'

Johnny suddenly realized there was something badly wrong with this man something that made him uneasy He remembered all the truckers in Reddy's café hadn't spoken to Davis nor even waved to him

'Your head ache now?' he asked

It's fine I give the old nut three or four whams and then it behaves itself'

Johnny lit a cigarette 'Want a smoke?'

'Not me Never have, never will Where are you from, Al?'

'New York,' Johnny lied 'I've never been south . . . thought I'd take a look'

'Sort of travelling light, huh?'

'My stuff's coming by train'

'Good idea' A long pause, then Davis said, Did you see Cooper knock Ali on his pants?'

'Saw it on the telly'

'I was right there You ever been in London?'

'No.'

'Ali took me with the rest of the mob Some city' Davis grinned. 'Those chicks! Skirts way up beyond their fannies.' He thumped his head again 'You see Frazier beat Ali?'

'On the telly'

'I was right there He'll come back . . . the greatest'

Johnny stared through the dusty windshield They were driving between citrus orchards, either side of the freeway He looked at his watch The time was now 07 30

'How long to Jacksonville?'

'Ten hours if this bitch keeps going You in a hurry?'

'I've all the time in the world'

There was a long silence as the truck roared on, then Davis asked, 'You married?'

'Me? No'

'I guessed that You wouldn't be on a trip like this if you were You know something? A guy can find a good woman or a bad woman I guess I had no luck'

Johnny didn't say anything

'You're lucky not to have kids,' Davis went on 'I've got a girl Sex is all she thinks about and her mother doesn't give a goddamn' Davis thumped his head so violently Johnny winced 'What can you do? If I took a strap to her, the cops would arrive There ain't a thing a father can do if his daughter has the hots'

Johnny thought of Melanie What was happening to her? Had Massino ? He flinched and forced the thought from his mind

'Getting hot' Davis said and wiped his face with the back of his hand 'This is a hell of a haul' He kept the shuddering truck at seventy miles an hour They were now out of the farming country and coming to the swamp land 'This I hate,' Davis said 'Snakes, jungle you watch it We'll get by After a while, we'll come to the real country the south!'

Watching this big man as he crouched over the driving wheel, seeing the glazed expression in his eyes, Johnny knew something bad was about to happen

'You're driving too fast!' he shouted 'Cut it down!'

'You call this fast?' Davis turned his head to look at Johnny who felt a chill go up his spine The small eyes with their scar tissue were turning sightless 'The greatest like me! He'll come back!'

'Watch the road!' Johnny shouted 'Joe!'

Davis grinned stupidly, then took his hands off the steering wheel and began to beat his head Johnny made a grab at the wheel but he was too late The truck roared off the freeway and with screaming tyres, it ploughed into the jungle

Thrown against the cabin door, Johnny felt the door give and felt himself falling He landed on his back in a thick flowering bush that broke his fall, then he rolled to the ground

He lay stunned, listening to the truck ploughing through the thicket, then came the sound of a grinding crash as the truck hit a tree As he struggled upright, the gas tank of the truck exploded and the truck went up in a roaring sheet of flame

Johnny started towards the blaze, then saw it was hopeless His sense of self-preservation asserted itself Within minutes a prowler would arrive It would be fatal if the cops found him They would question him, search him, and the moment they found he had a gun and three hundred ten-dollar bills stuffed into his pockets, he would be cooked

He started down a narrow path that led into the jungle, aware that his right ankle hurt. He forced himself along, limping now and frightened that he had suffered an injury that might develop into something bad.

He hadn't gone more than five hundred yards when he heard the wail of a siren. He broke into a limping run, stumbled and fell flat.

Hell! he thought. I've hurt my goddamn self! He scrambled to his feet and set off again, but this time he was in bad pain and was dragging his leg. After a hundred yards or so, with cold sweat running down his face, he could go no further. He looked around. To his right was a big clump of tangled undergrowth. He forced his way to it, then collapsed on the damp ground. Sure that anyone coming down the path couldn't see him, he stretched out his aching leg and prepared to wait.

What Johnny couldn't know was that this accident had saved his life. Had Davis delivered him to Jacksonville, Johnny would have walked into the trap Ernie and Toni had set up.

He didn't know, and he cursed his luck as he lay in the undergrowth feeling his leg slowly stiffening. He had been lying there for the past four hours.

The police, the ambulance and the break-down truck had come and gone. The jungle was cool, and Johnny, badly shaken, was content to lie there and wait. He suffered. His ankle was swelling and when he looked at it, he saw with alarm it looked red and angry. Had he broken it? Maybe it was just a bad sprain. The thoughts of putting his weight on it made him flinch.

Later, he became thirsty. He looked at his watch. The time was now 1:05. He would have to make an effort to get to the freeway. With any luck he would pick up a ride. He had to get to Jackson!

He crawled out of the thicket and on to the path. He could smell the burned-out truck and the undergrowth that had gone up with it. On the path, he forced himself up on one leg, then gently he put a little of his weight on his damaged ankle. Pain raved up from the ankle into his head.

Jesus! he thought. I'm in goddamn trouble! He sank down, feeling sweat break out on his face and a light feeling of faintness that frightened him.

He had better wait, he thought. He had better get back into the undergrowth. Maybe later, he would be able to use his leg.

He began to crawl back towards the undergrowth when he saw the snake.

The thick-bodied Cottonmouth was coiled within eight feet of him. It raised its olive green head and its forked tongue darted.

Johnny turned cold, the pain in his ankle forgotten. He had

a horror of snakes He lay there, motionless, not even blinking, watching the snake Apart from its darting tongue, it too remained motionless

Minutes dragged by Johnny thought of his gun Should he try to shoot the snake? Then he thought of the danger Someone might hear the sound of the shot and come to investigate Maybe the snake would go away if he waited long enough Would it attack him? It could be harmless He had no knowledge of snakes and wasn't to know that a Cottonmouth was lethal

Then slowly the snake began to uncoil while Johnny watched it with horror The snake slid into the undergrowth where Johnny had been hiding With the back of his hand, Johnny wiped away the sweat streaming down his face Had that green nightmare been in the thicket with him?

He had to get out of here!

The sun was now penetrating the overhanging trees What wouldn't he have given for a drink? The jungle could be swarming with snakes! Again he hoisted himself on one leg He began hopping down the path towards the freeway He had only taken four hops when he lost balance The whole weight of his body came down on his injured ankle He heard himself cry out as pain raved through him, then he fell, his head thumping down on a tree root and blackness swept over him.

'If they're coming they should have been here by now,' Ernie said. He had just finished a can of pork and beans and he released a gentle belch

He and Toni were sitting in a ditch that gave them a direct view of the small clapboard house where Fuselli lived Their car was out of sight behind a clump of trees, a quarter of a mile further down the dirt road

'So okay so what?' Toni was slightly drunk To bolster up his nerve, he had been hitting the bottle

'I'm going into town to call the boss' Ernie said 'He'll be wondering what we're doing We've been sitting in this goddamn ditch for eight hours.'

'So what?' Toni repeated 'They could have had a blow-out You stick here, Ernie Don't get your bowels in an uproar' He reached for a can of stewed steak 'They could show any minute'

Ernie got to his feet 'I'm going You stay here'

'The hell with that!' Toni wasn't too drunk to realize that on his own, if Johnny showed up, he could be in trouble 'You stick right here! Let's give them a couple of hours, then we both go down town'

'Shut up!' Ernie snarled 'You stick here' Climbing out of the ditch, he walked down the road to where the car was hidden.

Twenty minutes later, he was talking to Massino. He explained the situation.

'Right now, boss, we're staked out, out of sight, in front of Fuselli's pad, but it's eight hours now. They should have been here four hours back. Toni reckons they could have had a blow-out or something. I don't know. What do I do?'

'Could be Toni's right,' Massino said. 'Stick around, Ernie, if they don't show by eight o'clock tomorrow, come on back.'

'Anything you say, boss,' Ernie said, thinking of the discomfort of spending a night in the ditch.

Massino slammed down the receiver, then turned to Andy who was prowling around the office.

He told him what Ernie had said.

'There's one thing we should have done, Mr Joe,' Andy said. 'We should have checked out Reddy's café. I'll do it. We should have thought of that right away.'

'I want you here!' Massino snapped. 'Get someone to do it! Send Lu Berilli!'

'I'll do it myself,' Andy said firmly. He was sick of staying in the office listening to Massino cursing Johnny. 'I'll . . . Then he stopped as he saw Massino glaring at him, his little eyes like red, flaming buttons.

'You stay here!' Massino snarled. 'Don't forget you're the only punk who had the key to the safe? So, you stay here until I find Johnny and the money!'

Andy was expecting this.

'And if you don't find him?'

'Then I'll start looking at you! Tell Berilli to go to the café and ask around.'

'You're the boss, Mr Joe,' Andy said and reaching for the telephone he instructed Lu Berilli to go to Reddy's café.

Three hours later, Lu Berilli came hurriedly into Massino's office. Berilli was a tall, thin Italian, around thirty years of age with a movie-star profile and a success with women. Massino considered him a bright boy and he was right. Berilli had a good brain, but Massino knew his limitations. There was a yellow streak in Berilli; he had no stomach for violence, and that meant he couldn't rise very high in Massino's kingdom.

'You've taken your goddamn time!' Massino snarled.

'I wanted to get this dead right, Mr Joe,' Berilli said quietly, 'And I've got it right.' He produced a one inch to the mile map and spread it on Massino's desk. Leaning forward, he tapped with a manicured finger-nail. 'Right here, Mr Joe, is where I guess Bianda is at this moment.'

Massino, surprised, stared at the map, then up at Berilli.

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'From my information, Johnny got a ride with a punch-drunk trucker,' Berilli said 'Heading south I was told this trucker was due to blow his top That's what he did The truck went off the freeway around seventy miles an hour just here' Berilli again tapped the map 'The trucker was killed There was a hell of a smash There's no trace of Bianda, but he has to be hurt If we act fast, it's my bet he's holed up somewhere in this bit of jungle I've marked If we get the mob down there pronto, we could flush him out'

Massino's lips came off his teeth in a snarling grin

'Good work, Lu,' he said, then raising his voice, he bawled for Andy

Johnny felt cold water on his face that trickled into his mouth He became aware of a shadowy figure bending over him Fear clutched at him and he struggled up, shaking his head, forcing his eyes into focus Then the figure bending over him became clear a thin, bearded man, wearing a bush hat and khaki drill He had a hooked nose and the sharpest, clearest blue eyes Johnny had even seen

'Take it easy,' the man said gently. 'You've found a friend'

Johnny struggled up into a sitting position He was immediately aware of a dull, throbbing pain in his head and a sharp, grinding pain in his right ankle

'I've bust my ankle,' he said, then grabbed hold of the water bottle the man was holding and drank thirstily 'Phew!' He lowered the bottle and regarded the man suspiciously

'You have a bad sprain,' the man said 'No bones broken Just take it easy I'll get an ambulance Do you live around here?'

'Who are you?' Johnny asked His hand slid inside his coat and his sweating fingers closed around the butt of his gun

'I'm Jay Freeman,' the man said and smiled He was squatting on his heels 'You take it easy I'll get you fixed'

'No!'

The snap in Johnny's voice made Freeman look sharply at him

'Are you in trouble, friend?' he asked

Friend?

No one had ever used that word to him Friend?

It was now Johnny's turn to look sharply at Freeman and what he saw was reassuring

'You call it that,' he said 'I'm in a spot, but I've got money. Can you put me under the wraps until this goddamn ankle is okay?'

Freeman patted Johnny's sweat-soaked arm

'I told you . . . take it easy. Is it police trouble?'

'More than that'

'Put your arm around my neck. Let's go.'

With surprising strength, he got Johnny up on his left foot, then, supporting him, he helped him hop along the path until they reached the edge of the jungle where an old, broken-down Ford stood, parked in the shade.

Johnny was sweating and in pain as Freeman helped him into the car.

'Relax,' Freeman said as he slid under the driving wheel. 'You've nothing to worry about.'

Johnny relaxed. The pain in his ankle kept him from talking. He just lay against the worn plastic seat, thankful he was moving.

He was dimly aware of being driven along the freeway, then up a dirt road, then along a narrow path where tree branches scraped against the sides of the car.

'Here's home,' Freeman said and brought the car to a stop.

Johnny raised his head. He stared at a low-built log cabin, set in a clearing with trees overshadowing it. It looked good and safe to him.

'No problem,' Freeman said as he got out of the car. 'You can rest up here.'

He half carried, half dragged Johnny into the cabin that consisted of a living-room, two bedrooms and a shower room. It was sparsely furnished and one side of the living-room was lined with books.

Freeman got Johnny into the smaller bedroom and propped him up against the wall. Then he stripped off the cotton coverlet on the bed and, with care, steered him around and got him on to the bed.

'Just relax,' Freeman said and went away.

Johnny's ankle hurt so badly, he only half registered what was going on. He lay on the bed, staring up at the wooden ceiling, not believing this was happening to him.

Freeman returned with a glass of ice cold beer in his hand.

'Drink this.' He gave Johnny the beer. 'I'll look at your ankle.'

Johnny drank the beer in one gorgeous gulp. He set the glass down on the floor.

'Thanks! Man! Did I need that!'

'It's a bad sprain,' Freeman told him. He had got Johnny's shoe and sock off. 'It can be fixed. In a week, you'll be able to walk.'

Johnny half sat up. 'A week?'

'You're safe here, friend,' Freeman said, 'No one ever comes here. Maybe you're a stranger in this district. I'm known as the Snake Man, and you have no idea the horror people have of snakes.'

Johnny stared at him. 'Snakes?'

'I catch snakes. It's a living. I work with the hospitals. They're

always yelling for serum I supply them Right now I have three hundred venomous snakes in cages behind this cabin People keep clear of me' While he was talking, he bound Johnny's ankle with a bandage soaked in iced water Already the pain was lessening 'Feel like eating? I've been out all morning and I haven't had a bite Want to join me?'

'I could eat a horse,' Johnny said

Freeman chuckled 'That's something not on the menu,' he said 'Won't be long'

Within ten minutes he came back with two soup plates full of thick, savoury-smelling stew He sat on the end of the bed, handed Johnny one of the plates and began to eat When Johnny had finished, he decided it was about the best meal he had eaten in years

'You're some cook!' he said 'Never tasted anything so good'

'Yes rattlesnake meat, when cooked the right way, is pretty good,' Freeman said, collecting the plates

Johnny's eyes opened wide 'That snake meat?'

'I live on it'

'Well, for God's sake!'

Freeman laughed 'A lot better than horse' He went away and Johnny heard him washing up

After a while, Freeman came back into the small bedroom

'I've things to do,' he said 'You don't have to worry No one comes here I'll be back in three or four hours' He eyed the beginning of a beard on Johnny's face 'Want to shave? I have a cordless'

Johnny shook his head. 'I reckon on growing a beard'

The two men looked at each other, then Freeman nodded

'Take a nap I'll lock you in,' and he went away

Although his head and ankle still ached, Johnny slid into sleep When he awoke the light was fading and he felt a lot better His headache had gone away, but his ankle still bothered him

Lying there, looking out of the window, watching the sun sink behind the trees, he wondered about Freeman An odd-ball, he told himself, but someone he felt he could trust Instinctively, he was sure of that

He turned his thoughts to Massino Having worked so long for him, Johnny could guess how he was reacting like an enraged bull

How long would it be before he went to Tanza and asked the organization to take over? Maybe the organization was already hunting for him Johnny thought of all that money stashed away in the left-luggage locker He thought of Sammy He would have to get in touch with him As soon as his ankle was mended, he would have to telephone him and explain why he had had to take

his savings Sammy might be able to tell him what action Massino was taking

He saw a movement through the open window and his hand flew to his gun. Then he relaxed as he saw Freeman coming across the clearing, carrying a burlap sack that jerked and writhed in his grasp.

Snakes! Johnny grimaced. What a way to earn a living!

Five minutes later, Freeman came into the bedroom, carrying two glasses of ice cold beer.

'How's the ankle?' he asked, giving Johnny one of the glasses and then sitting on the end of the bed.

'Still hurts, but nothing bad.'

'I'll take a look at it in a moment,' Freeman drank, sighed, then set down the half-empty glass. 'I found three Cottonmouths. You've brought me luck.' He smiled. 'Do I ask your name, friend, or would you rather I didn't?'

'Call me Johnny.' A pause, then Johnny said, 'Do you always treat strangers the way you're treating me?'

'You're the first. Yes, I believe in helping people when I can. A long time ago I needed a lot of help myself and someone came along and helped me. It's something I remember. Cast your bread upon the waters.' Freeman chuckled. 'I'm not a religious man, but that saying makes sense to me. There's one thing I've learned, living the way I do, and that's not to ask questions and to accept people on face value.'

'That's as good a rule as any,' Johnny said quietly. 'I guess I'm lucky you found me.'

'Let's have a look at the ankle, then I'll help you undress. I've got a spare pair of pyjamas you can have.'

Gently, he removed the bandage, soaked it in ice water, and replaced it. Then he helped Johnny out of his jacket.

Only for the briefest moment did Freeman pause when he saw the gun holster and the gun. Then he waited until Johnny unbuckled the harness and put the gun down by his side.

'That's part of my trouble,' Johnny said.

'I guess it's part of a lot of people's troubles these days,' Freeman said. 'Let's get your pants off,' and he gently drew Johnny's trousers over the injured ankle.

There was a tinkling sound and Freeman looked down. He bent and picked up something, then looked at Johnny. 'Is this yours?' he asked. 'It dropped out of your trousers' cuff.'

He held out his open palm.

Lying in the middle of his palm was the St Christopher medal.

Johnny lay staring out of the open window at the moonlit jungle. From the other bedroom, he could hear Freeman snoring softly.

He held the St Christopher medal in his hand

It had come back to him, he was thinking, but at what a cost!

All the time he had been searching for it, it had been in his trousers' cuff as if jeering at him! Had it not been for the medal he would have still been working for Massino, helping him in his search for the missing money! Because he panicked, believing the medal was in Andy's office, he was now on the run. He felt like throwing the medal out of the window and cursing it, but he was too superstitious to do this.

As long as you have it, nothing really bad can happen to you

He could hear his mother's sad, weary voice as if she were in the room with him.

Well, he had it back! So maybe the organization wouldn't find him. Maybe, after all, he would have his boat. Maybe he would be the first man in history to escape the Mafia's death sentence!

He hooked the medal on to the chain and squeezed the hook tightly shut.

But lying there, watching the rising moon, listening to the sounds of the wind in the trees, the medal cold against his sweating chest, gave him no comfort.

He lay sleepless until the dawn came and then he slept and while he slept two cars, with the pick of Massino's mob, converged on the scene of the truck accident.

Lu Berilli was in charge of the operation. The cars pulled up as the sun began to climb, lighting the jungle.

Berilli surveyed the dense jungle facing him and grimaced. This, he now realized, was going to be a hell of an operation. If Johnny was hiding somewhere in these thickets, someone could get hurt, and Berilli had no stomach to come up against a man with Johnny's reputation for fast shooting. He wished he had kept his mouth shut, but it was now too late. Eight men crowded around him, waiting. They were all tough and trigger-happy—specially picked by Massino.

'This is the spot,' Berilli said, trying to sound confident. 'We'll split up. Three of you to the left, three to the right. Freddy, Jack and me go down the centre. Watch it! He's in there somewhere. Don't take any chances.'

The two he had picked to go with him—Freddy and Jack—were button men who had worked for the Mafia and had been loaned to Massino as the New York police were hunting for them, ruthless killers, utterly without nerves.

Freddy was in his late twenties—thin, hard, dark with stony eyes and an irritating habit of whistling through his teeth. Jack was five years older than Freddy. He was a garotte artist, short, squat with restless flat eyes and an inane grin that was a fixture on his fat face.

The men split up and moved into the dark jungle
Reaching the burned-out truck, Berilli paused
'Some smash,' he said He looked down the path that led deeper
into the jungle 'Jack, you go ahead I follow you. Freddy keeps
in the rear Take it slow He could be holed up anywhere in this
goddamn mess'

Johnny came awake as Freeman opened his bedroom door
'Good night?' Freeman asked and gave Johnny a cup of tea.
'Fair' Johnny sat up and gratefully sipped the tea
'I'm off into the jungle,' Freeman said, 'but I'll take a look
before I go.' He went out and returned with a bowl of ice water,
changed the bandage, then nodded his satisfaction 'It's coming
along, the inflammation has gone I won't be back for seven or
eight hours. I'll leave you some cold stew. You want a book?'
Johnny shook his head 'I don't read books I'll be okay'
'I'll lock you in and pull the shutters You don't have to worry.
No one ever comes here, but let's play it safe'

Johnny's fingers touched his gun
'I'll be fine and thanks for everything'
With a bowl of cold rattlesnake stew by his side, a supply of
cigarettes and a flask of ice water, Johnny settled down on his
bed Freeman swung the heavy slatted wooden shutters closed.
'It'll be hot later,' he said, 'but better too hot than sorry.' He
seemed to sense the danger Johnny was in 'Sorry to leave you, but
I've got to find a cranebrake rattler The hospital is yelling for its
serum Could take me all day'

'I'm fine,' Johnny said 'Maybe I could use a book . anything
but the Bible'

Freeman went into the living-room and, after a while, came
back with a copy of *The Godfather* by Puzo

Johnny hadn't read a book since he had left school When he
found this book was the story of the Mafia organization he became
absorbed in it Time fled away So absorbed was he that he forgot
to eat the cold stew and it wasn't until he found the light was
fading as it came through the slatted shutters and he had difficulty
in seeing the print that he realized he was hungry, that his ankle
no longer ached and it was 17 20 by his watch

If books are as good as this one, he thought, I've been missing
something

He was finishing the cold stew and about to light a cigarette
when he heard the lock turn in the cabin door Hurriedly, he
dropped his cigarette and reached for his gun

'It's me,' Freeman called and came into the small bedroom 'I
think there's trouble There are three men heading this way.
They didn't see me They're all carrying guns.'

Johnny struggled upright

'They'll be here in ten minutes or less. Come on, Johnny, I can hide you where they won't think of looking' Freeman hoisted Johnny up on his left foot 'You hop. Don't put any weight on your bad foot'

Johnny grabbed up his gun and holster, then supported by Freeman, he hopped through the living-room and out into the sunshine. Freeman steered him to the big lean-to behind the cabin.

'This is my snake house,' Freeman said 'You don't have to be scared. They're all in cages and can't touch you'

He manoeuvred Johnny into the semi-darkness and Johnny could hear the dry rattling sound a rattlesnake makes when alarmed. Freeman propped him up against the wall, then moving to a big eight-foot-high cage, he dragged it forward. Johnny saw the cage was alive with writhing rattlesnakes. Freeman caught hold of him and got him behind the cage and propped him against the wall.

'You'll be okay,' he said 'Don't worry. I'll fix the bed. They won't know you're here,' then he moved the cage back on Johnny, wedging him against the wall and out of sight.

Johnny could smell the snakes. Their movements chilled him. Leaning hard on his sound foot, keeping his injured foot slightly off the ground, he set himself to wait.

Berilli, flanked on either side by Freddy and Jack, suddenly came on the clearing and Freeman's cabin.

For hours now they had combed the jungle and they were sick and tired of the search. They had become careless. Berilli had realized after three or four hours that Johnny could be lying, hidden, in any of the big thickets and by keeping still, they could have walked past him.

He realized this operation had been too hastily mounted. What they needed in this goddamn place was a dog to flush Johnny out. But now he was stuck with the operation and he was scared to go back to Massino and report no success.

He, Freddy and Jack had walked through the jungle for six gruelling hours. The only thing they had seen that moved was a snake. Then just when Berilli was about to call off the operation and admit defeat, they came on the clearing and the log cabin.

The three instinctively dodged back behind a thicket.

'He could be here,' Berilli said.

They stared across the clearing at the cabin, then they saw a tall, thin man, wearing shabby khaki drill come out of the cabin. He walked over to the well and began drawing water.

'Jack . . . you talk to him,' Berilli said.

'Not me, pal,' Jack said 'You chat him up. I'll cover you.'

'So will I,' Freddy said and grinned. 'You're the boss, Lu.'

So Berilli moved out of the clearing, his heart thumping, wondering if Johnny was holed up in the cabin, taking aim at him through the slatted shutters

Freeman looked up as Berilli approached him

'Hi, stranger' His voice was soft and calm 'Have you lost your way? I haven't seen anyone this way for months'

Berilli eyed him, keeping his gun behind him, out of sight

'You live here?' he demanded

'That's right' Freeman was perfectly at ease 'Jay Freeman I'm the snake man'

Berilli stiffened 'Snakes? What do you mean?'

Patently, Freeman explained

'I collect serum for hospitals' He paused, looking directly into Berilli's suspicious eyes 'Who are you?'

'Have you seen a short, thick-set man with black hair, around forty years of age? We're looking for him'

'As I said, you're the first human I've seen in months'

Berilli looked uneasily at the cabin.

'You'd better not lie to me If he's in there, you're in trouble and I mean trouble'

'What's all this about?' Freeman asked mildly. 'Are you the police?'

Ignoring the question, Berilli signalled to the other two who came out from behind the thicket

'We'll take a look at your cabin,' he said to Freeman as Jack and Freddy joined him 'Go ahead, bright boy, and stop flapping with your mouth'

Freeman walked into the cabin Using him as a shield, Berilli entered behind him, his gun in his hand, his heart pounding, while Jack and Freddy waited outside After a quick search, pushing Freeman always ahead of him, Berilli came out of the cabin and into the sunshine He shook his head at the other two

'What is that?' he demanded, seeing the lean-to

'My snake house,' Freeman said 'Have a look I've just caught a cranebrake rattler Have you ever seen one?'

Crouched behind the snake cage, Johnny heard every word and he thumbed back the safety on his gun He could hear a soft whistling sound and he knew who was out there Freddy, a Mafia killer and more dangerous than any of the snakes, writhing and rattling around him

'Go ahead,' Berilli said and prodded Freeman with his gun.

Again sheltering behind Freeman, Berilli peered into the lean-to, saw the cages, smelt the snake smell and backed away

He crossed over to Freddy and Jack

'Let's get out of here,' he said 'We could search this goddamn jungle for months and still not find him'

'That's the brightest thing you've said so far,' Jack said

Freeman watched the three men move off into the jungle, then he fetched a bucket of water from the well and returned to his cabin. He waited some ten minutes, then leaving the cabin, he moved into the jungle as quietly and as swiftly as one of his snakes. Without being seen or heard, he caught up with the three men and watched them meet up with six other men, watched them talk, then saw them get into two cars and drive away.

Then he returned to his cabin to release Johnny from his hiding-place and assure him the hunt was over.

CHAPTER SIX

FOR EIGHT long boring days Johnny remained in Freeman's cabin. During this time his beard made progress and his ankle mended.

Looking at himself in the mirror in the shower room, he saw how the beard altered his appearance and he felt confident, unless he was examined closely, that no one would recognize him. He had got Freeman to drive into town and buy him two sets of khaki drill, a bush jacket and a bush hat, together with toilet things, shirts, socks and a suitcase.

Although, from time to time, his ankle still ached, he could now walk fairly well and he felt it was time to move on. He decided to pick up a south-bound truck on the freeway and make his way to Jackson. He was sure Fuselli would give him shelter for a time, and then when the heat had cooled off, he would go back and collect the money. By that time his grey-black beard would be impressive and he felt the risk of returning had to be taken. With some of the money he had taken from Sammy he would buy a used car and still have plenty in hand.

But first he must have information.

So on the eighth day, now dressed in khaki drill and wearing the bush hat, he asked Freeman to drive him into town.

'I've got to make a phone call,' he explained.

Johnny hadn't seen much of Freeman during his stay at the cabin. The snake man went off at dawn and seldom got back until dusk. They then spent a couple of hours together over supper and then both went to bed. But during those hours Freeman never asked questions, talked easily about every subject under the sun and encouraged Johnny to read, and Johnny discovered the magic of books. The books he liked best were books on travel and sailing and Freeman had a good selection.

'Sure,' Freeman said 'Are you thinking of leaving? You can stay here as long as you like, Johnny'

'I've got to get on'

'I'll miss you'

This was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to Johnny and to hide his emotion, he gave Freeman a light punch on his arm.

'Yeah that makes two of us, and I won't forget what you've done for me Now listen, I've plenty of money I want you to have two hundred for all you've done for me Buy yourself a telly or something to remember me by'

Freeman laughed

Appreciated but not accepted That's one thing I never need money You keep it You may need it I won't

They drove into town early the following morning Johnny felt naked and his eyes darted continuously to right and left Under his bush jacket was his gun and he kept fingering the butt But he saw no one suspicious He went into the small hotel and shut himself in a call booth He looked at his watch the time was 08 10. Sammy should be getting up by now He dialled the number and waited

Sammy answered almost immediately

'Sammy this is Johnny'

He heard Sammy catch his breath

'I—I don't want to talk to you, Mr Johnny You could get me into bad trouble I've got nothing to say to you'

'Listen!' Johnny put a snap in his voice 'You're my friend, Sammy . remember? I've done a lot for you . now its your turn' He heard Sammy moan softly and he could imagine him sweating, grey-faced and trembling

'Yeah What is it, Mr Johnny? You took all my money That wasn't nice You're in real bad, and if they knew you were talking to me, I'd be in real bad, too'

'They won't know Sammy I had to have that money You'll get it back I promise Don't worry about it Are they looking for me?'

'They sure are! This Mr Tanza is handling it! I heard the boss and Mr Tanza talking while I was driving them I don't know where you are and I don't want to know, but they're looking for you in Florida They talked of someone called Fuselli. Toni and Ernie are out there You've got to be careful, Mr Johnny.'

Johnny stiffened So the heat really was on! How the hell had Massino got on to Fuselli?

'Have you gone crazy, Mr Johnny?' Sammy went on, his voice husky 'You really took all that money? I can't believe it! Mr Joe is like he's demented I'd sooner collect than drive him He scares me to death the way he acts!'

'I'll call you in a little while, Sammy,' Johnny said quietly. 'Keep your ears open Don't worry about your money you'll get it back Just listen to everything the boss says I need your help'

'Mr Johnny, please keep away from me If they find out please, Mr Johnny You keep my money Just keep away from me,' and Sammy hung up

Johnny stood motionless in the stuffy booth, staring out into the lounge of the hotel, feeling his heart beating heavily and a chill of fear down his spine By going to Fuselli as he had planned, he could have walked into a trap Now he really was on his own

Leaving the booth, he went out into the sunshine and got in the car by Freeman's side

'Okay?' Freeman asked as he started the motor

Johnny thought of Carlo Tanza This meant the Mafia organization were now hunting for him and they had somehow guessed he was heading south They had somehow got on to Fuselli He had a feeling of being in a net For a moment, the net was above him and around him but he still had room to manoeuvre

'Not so good,' he said and lit a cigarette 'Don't worry your brains about me I'll move on tonight.'

Freeman glanced at him, then drove back to the cabin in silence.

When the two men entered the cabin, Freeman said, 'Look Johnny, two heads are better than one Do you feel like talking or do you still want to handle this on your own?'

For a brief moment, Johnny was tempted to pour out the whole story, then he thought of the danger Freeman could be in If the Mafia even suspected he had hidden here, they would torture Freeman until he talked, then kill him

'I'll handle it,' he said 'You keep out of it'

'As bad as that?' Freeman looked searchingly at him

'That's it as bad as that'

'You'll come out of it, Johnny There's something about you .. guts I don't know, but I'll put my money on you'

'Not too much,' Johnny said and forced a smile 'I'd hate you to lose it' He went into his room, shut the door and lay on the bed

What was he to do? he asked himself He longed to go south, but if they knew that was where he was heading, wouldn't it be asking for trouble? He considered this On the face of it, it would be risking a lot, but maybe the risk was worth it Maybe, after a while, they would decide he hadn't gone south after all and start looking elsewhere Anyway, wherever he went they would be hunting for him and he wanted so badly to go south

For an hour or so, he lay there, experiencing a sick feeling of being trapped, then a tap came on the door and Freeman came in

'I've work to do, Johnny,' he said 'I won't be back until late Why not stay on here?'

'No' Johnny got off the bed 'It'll work out as you said I'll be gone by the time you get back I want to say thanks' He stared for a long moment at Freeman 'You may not know it, but I'd be dead by now but for you'

I didn't know it was that bad Those three men . . . ?'

Johnny held out his hand 'The less you know'

The two men shook hands There was a pause, then Freeman went away Through the window, Johnny watched him striding into the jungle, carrying his sack

So what was he going to do now? He fingered his St Christopher medal Why wait until dark? Why not go now? He felt the urge to get out of this suffocating jungle and on to the freeway He took out his gun, checked it, then slid it back into its holster. Then he picked up his suitcase, looked around the little room, feeling a pang of loneliness to be leaving it, then walked out into the sunshine and started down the jungle path that would eventually bring him to the freeway

It took him half an hour to get out of the jungle and to the freeway This long walk made his ankle ache Once on the freeway, he kept on, limping a little until he was some two miles from Freeman's cabin Then he paused, leaning against a tree and watched the traffic roar by

Trucks, cars and cars pulling caravans roared by him He decided to start walking again By now his ankle was throbbing and he wondered, with a feeling of alarm, if he had been too confident about his injury He stopped in the shade and as he was about to sit on the grass to rest an open truck came to a stop some twenty yards from him

Grabbing up his suitcase, he limped up to the truck The driver had got out and had the hood up He was staring at the engine

As Johnny approached the man, he looked hard at him tall, lean, around twenty-seven years of age with long nut-brown hair, wearing dirty overalls, and to Johnny, harmless enough

'You in trouble?' Johnny asked as he reached the truck.

The man looked up

An odd face, Johnny thought Thin, narrow eyes, a small mouth, a thin nose and a sour expression which Johnny had often seen a defeated face

'Never out of it. I live in trouble Just a goddamn plug' He stood away from the truck and lit a cigarette 'Got to let her cool off You looking for a ride?'

Johnny set down his suitcase 'Yeah Where are you heading?'

Little Creek That's my home This side of New Symara'

'I pay my way,' Johnny said

The man looked sharply at him, cycling Johnny's new khaki drill, his new bush hat

'Is that right?'

'Ten dollars' Johnny knew when a man needed money. He had seen that expression over and over again.

'Sure friend, I'll take you. Ten dollars, huh?'

Johnny felt in his pocket and produced a ten-dollar bill.

'Let's pay in advance, then we can forget it.'

Lean, long fingers took the bill.

'I'll change the plug. You get in, friend.'

Ten minutes later, the man swung himself into the cab beside Johnny.

'I'm Ed Scott,' he said as he started the motor.

'Johnny Bianco,' Johnny said.

The truck began to roar down the freeway.

'What's your racket, Ed?' Johnny asked after a mile or two of silence.

'I haul shrimps,' Scott gave a harsh, bitter laugh. 'Every goddamn day except Sunday I pick up a hundred crates of shrimps and rush them to Richville—that's a hundred and twenty mile haul—two hundred and forty there and back. In this truck I do it in four hours—so that's eight hours of my day, sitting here, driving. I have to get up at five to load up. I don't get back home until seven. I've a three-year contract with four top-class Richville restaurants—they use shrimps the way a bucket full of holes uses water. I thought I'd found Eldorado when I got this contract, but, man! is it a killer!'

Johnny was listening. He thought: what a way to earn a living! 'Goddamn it!' Scott went on. 'I should have my head examined!' Freda warned me—my wife. You know something? I don't listen to women. Women are all piss and wind. They yak for the sake of hearing their own voices. But after eight months of this, I'm beginning to think Freda has more sense than me. A year ago I was hauling for the Florida Citrus people. That paid steady, and it wasn't hard, but I have this bug. I can't work with people. When some punk of an overseer starts sounding off, I flip my lid. I have to work on my own and for myself.' He glanced at Johnny. 'You with me or aren't you?'

'I'm with you,' Johnny said quietly. He took out his pack of cigarettes. 'Smoke?'

'Why not?'

Johnny lit two cigarettes and passed one to Scott.

'So I've saved some money and I bought this truck and I think I'm in business,' Scott went on. 'I say I'll haul anything. So okay, I get landed with this shrimp contract. There's no let-up. I've got to get these goddamn shrimps up to Richville every day or they

can sue the pants off me And what do I get out of it? That's what Freda asked and I wouldn't listen to her So I've found out I clear a hundred and fifty bucks a week That has to take care of me, my wife, repairs to the truck, the rent and all the other extras and I'm now finding I'm working my goddamn tail off for peanuts'

'You have yourself a tough deal,' Johnny said

'You can say that again' There was a long pause, then Scott said, 'And you? What's your racket?'

'Call me a bum,' Johnny said 'For years I've been a rent-collector and suddenly I could take it no more I sold up everything I owned my car, a TV set, stuff. you know and I'm here I've lived north all my life So I've come south When my money runs out, I'll get a job, but not until my money runs out'

'You've got no wife?'

'No'

'Yeah a man is free without a woman You're lucky Get a woman and you have to work'

'You got kids?'

'I wanted a couple but Freda's against it I guess, now looking back, she was right The way we live no place for kids'

'There's time you're young'

Scott laughed 'I guess, but they won't come now Not on this shrimp haul'

He lapsed into moody silence Tired by his walk and lulled by the roar of the engine, Johnny dozed off He slept for half an hour, then came awake with a start The truck was pounding down the freeway on either side were mangrove trees and jungle He glanced at Scott, saw his sweat-glistening, exhausted face and saw the tension in his hands and arms as he held the wheel

'Suppose you let me drive?' Johnny said, 'and you take a nap? What's the matter with that?'

'Could you handle her?' Scott looked hopefully at Johnny.

'I can handle anything on four wheels'

Scott slowed, pulled on to the verge and stopped the truck

'Could I sleep?' he said 'You keep going When you see a signpost marked Eastling, wake me up Okay?'

'Nothing to it' They exchanged seats, and even before Johnny had started the truck, Scott was asleep

So Johnny drove, careful not to exceed the speed limit, aware that if some maniac caused an accident, he would be in more trouble Suddenly, after eight days in hiding, with nothing to do, he felt relaxed He was now doing a job and he realized that was what he wanted to do

He thought about what Scott had told him Eight hours a day in this hot truck and the pay off one hundred and fifty dollars!

His mind shifted to all that money waiting for him in the left luggage locker! \$186,000! But when would he get it? Would he ever get it? The organization was now looking for him! That meant hundreds of people throughout the south who had some connection with the Mafia would be warned to look out for him. One never knew who was employed by the Mafia and who wasn't, but he was certain that there would be always someone in a bar, a café, even a garage, a cheap eating-house, a cheap hotel, a motel who might have Mafia connections. When he finally reached Little Creek which Scott had said was where he lived, what was he to do? A sudden stranger! Even with his beard, he would be investigated. He was sure, knowing how the Mafia worked, there would be a reward out for him. He looked at the sleeping man lolling in the corner of the cab. Very few brains there, he thought. An individualist—a man who had worked on his own because he couldn't submit to discipline. Johnny understood that, but because of this failing, this man had got himself into a rat race that made him less than a slave.

Johnny switched his mind from his own troubles and thought about what Scott had told him. He got up at 05 00, loaded up crates of shrimps, then belted up the freeway, four hours there, four hours back, got home at 19 00, in time for dinner, a look at the telly and then bed—six days a week for one hundred and fifty dollars! At the present cost of living, what did that mean!

Suddenly, he could smell the sea. He sniffed at it the way a woman will sniff at an outrageously expensive perfume. The sea! His mind flashed to a white, beautiful forty-five footer—his! Once he had got all this money, waiting for him in the left-luggage locker, he would go to some shipbuilder and talk boats. His heart beat excitedly as he imagined the moment when he had signed the papers, paid the money, then walked on the gang plank and on to the deck. His! Then he thought of the danger—going back, getting those two heavy bags out of the left-luggage locker, then getting out of town. Not yet! He would have to be patient. He would have to remain in hiding until the heat had really cooled off. Patience! Discipline! He would do it. Suddenly he felt confident. Sooner or later, Massino and the Mafia Dons would get bored trying to find him. He would keep in touch with Sammy who would alert him of any danger. When Sammy finally told him that the heat was off, then he would go back, but not before.

Ahead of him, he saw the signpost—Eastling, and he slowed down. Reaching across, he shook Scott awake.

'Here we are,' he said. 'Eastling.'

'Pull over and stop,' Scott said, shaking himself awake. 'Phew! Seems only five minutes.' He dug sleep out of his eyes. 'I'll take her.'

They changed seats

'Would there be somewhere for me to sleep?' Johnny asked

Scott looked at him 'I've a spare room cost you five bucks a day and all found. Want it?'

'You have yourself a deal,' Johnny said

Scott engaged gear and drove the truck on to the freeway.

While Johnny was driving Scott's truck, Massino was holding a meeting in his office. Present were Carlo Tanza and Andy Lucas

Massino had just explained to Tanza that the lead they had on this old guy Giovanni Fuselli was a wash-out. It was only with difficulty that Massino contained his rage and he kept glaring at Andy who had been responsible for this waste of time.

'What we've got to remember is Johnny didn't have the money with him when he left town,' Massino said 'It was Andy's idea he was working with someone else and we thought it could be this Fuselli, but it wasn't. Tom and Ernie are sure Fuselli is clean. So

one of two things. Either Johnny was working with someone we don't know about or he panicked and left the money stashed somewhere in town.' He looked at Tanza 'What do you think?'

'There's a third possibility,' Tanza said 'He could have put those two bags on a Greyhound bus. The station is right across the street. No problem there for him. You buy a ticket, stick the bags on a bus and they'll deliver to any Greyhound station on their route. I know that's what I would have done. I wouldn't have been nutty enough to stash the money here where I would have to come back for it, and from what I know about Bianda, he's far from nutty.'

'You don't think he was working with someone?'

Tanza shrugged

'Doesn't seem likely. He's a loner. The only friend he seems to have had is this smoke, Sammy the Black, and he wouldn't have the guts to steal chewing gum from a kid. Yeah, seems to me that's what Bianda did. Grabbed the money, rushed it across to the bus station, got the bags on a bus, knowing they would be delivered to await arrival, then he went back to his whore, found he had lost his medal, flipped his lid and beat it out of town.'

'We can check,' Massino said. He looked at Andy 'At that time there would be very few buses leaving. Get over there and check. Someone should remember if two heavy bags were put on a bus.'

Andy nodded and left the office

Massino looked at Tanza

'He's now been gone eight days.' His little eyes were like red beads 'Think you can find him?'

Tanza grinned evilly 'We always find them, but it costs.'

'So how much?'

'Depends on how long it takes Let's say fifty per cent of the take'

Massino said softly, 'I want him alive You'll get fifty per cent if he's delivered to me alive A third if he's dead'

'He could be tricky to take alive'

Massino closed his huge fists

I want him alive! I'm going to smash that sonofabitch to pulp with my own hands' His rage gave him an insane look and even Tanza who was ruthless and tough was shocked 'So get after him! Get your wonderful organization hunting him!' Massino slammed his fists down on the desk His voice rose to a snarling shout 'I don't give a goddamn what it costs! I want him!'

'Nearly home,' Scott said, slowing the truck 'A mile ahead and to the left is New Symara that's where I load Up here,' he swung the truck off the freeway and driving slowly climbed a narrow, sandy road, bordered either side with dense stands of pines, 'leads to Little Creek It's little enough A store, around a dozen cabins and the lake We've got a houseboat on the far side of the lake No one bothers us People in Little Creek are too busy to earn a dollar to bother anyone'

This was reassuring news to Johnny

The sandy track was now edged with thistles, ferns and blue flags The jungle behind was so thick it looked like a black curtain to Johnny

They came out suddenly on to the lake Johnny judged it to be a mile and a half across There were several boats out with men fishing One of the men raised his hand in a salute as Scott drove by Scott waved back

'Supper time,' he said with a crooked grin 'Everyone here fishes for their suppers and their goddamn dinners too I wonder if Freda's caught anything'

Leaving the group of cabins behind them, they drove for a mile through the jungle, then came out suddenly into a cleared space where Johnny saw a long, shabby houseboat with a twenty-foot-long, battered pier joining it to the mainland

'Lived here for two years,' Scott said as he drove the truck into a parking bay, covered with tatty bamboo 'Got it for a song Had to work on it, but now it's not too bad You reckon to stay long?'

Johnny turned and looked directly at Scott

'Doesn't that depend on what your wife says? She may not want a stranger hanging around'

'You don't have to worry about Freda she's as money hungry as I am I can use thirty-five bucks a week and she can use some company Not much fun for her being left here all alone all day'

Johnny continued to look directly at Scott

'Just a minute . Is there something wrong with your wife? Is she a cripple or something?'

'No what do you mean?'

'Come on, Scott,' Johnny said impatiently, 'grow up! Why should your wife want a man here . it's lonely enough Doesn't it worry you?'

'Why should it?' Scott said 'If you think you can lay her, go ahead If she has you, you're welcome I haven't touched her that way since we married' He leered 'I get all the loving I need in Richville and I don't need a lot When a guy works the way I do, once a month is all he needs'

'What's it between you two then?' Johnny asked, startled

'Forget it' Scott swung himself out of the cab 'If you want to stay, then stay as long as you like so long as you pay Come on, I'll show you your room'

As they walked across the pier, Scott paused and pointed

'There she is swimming Spends most of her time in the lake'

Johnny screwed up his eyes against the reflection of the sun on the still water He saw a head bobbing in the water, some three hundred yards from the houseboat

Scott put two fingers in his mouth and emitted a shrill whistle. A hand came out of the water in a wave

'Come on in,' Scott said

There was a good wide deck around the houseboat and together they entered a long, low living-room, shabbily furnished, but comfortable enough There was a TV set in one corner.

'Here's your room,' Scott said and opened the door 'Dump your things and have a swim We swim raw You don't have to bother about Freda She's seen more naked men than I've seen shrimps'

Johnny looked around the tiny room There was a bed, a closet, a night-table and a chair The window looked on to the lake. It was all clean and he liked it

'This is fine'

'It's okay'

Scott left him

Johnny looked out of the window He would have liked to have swum, but not naked He saw Scott come out on deck, naked and dive into the lake He watched him swim to the blonde head, pause, and after a minute or so swim on The blonde head headed towards the house boat

Johnny stood by the window and watched He kept out of sight, peering around the curtain as the woman swung herself on to the deck She was tall, brown-bodied and naked She had long legs, tight, firm breasts and as she turned and walked along the deck,

Johnny watched her heavy buttocks roll. His eyes had been too busy looking at her body to see her face except to notice her wet, blonde hair reached to the middle of her shoulders.

Johnny wiped the sweat off his face. What had he walked into? he asked himself. This was all woman—the most sensual, sexual body he had seen.

He now felt in urgent need of cold water. Stripping off, keeping on his underpants, he stepped out on to the deck and dived into the lake.

The cool water gave him pleasure. He was a powerful swimmer and he swam for some two hundred yards in a racing stroke to release the stiffness and the lust the woman had raised in him, then he turned around and swam back, joining Scott as he was swinging himself up on to the deck.

'I'll get you a towel,' Scott said and disappeared into the living-room. He returned moments later, tossed Johnny a towel, then disappeared again.

Johnny mopped off, then went to his bedroom. He smelt onions frying and his mouth watered. He realized he hadn't eaten since he had left the snake man's cabin and suddenly he was starving.

Dressed, he left his room and went into the living-room. Scott was smoking and staring out of the window. He looked up as Johnny came in. 'Okay?'

'Fine.'

'We don't drink here,' Scott said. 'Can't afford it. If you want a drink you can buy anything at the store. Take the motorboat over tomorrow.'

Johnny would have liked a whisky, but he sat down, shrugging. 'That smells good.'

'Yeah. Freda can cook.'

'You told her about me?'

'Oh, sure.' Scott leaned forward and turned to the TV set. 'She's in the kitchen.' He waved. 'Go talk to her.'

Johnny hesitated, then getting to his feet, he pushed open a door at the far end of the living-room and looked into the small kitchen with a butane gas cooker, a cupboard, a table, a refrigerator and Freda Scott.

She was stirring something in a pan and she looked up.

Johnny felt a little jolt. God! he thought, this woman's beautiful!

And she was. Her face matched her body. She had to be a Swede with those bright china blue eyes, the blonde, silky hair, the high cheek bones, the straight, long nose.

While he stared at her, she gave him a brief, quick searching look, then scooping up raw, chopped-up fish, she dropped the pieces into the pan.

'Hungry?' She had a musical, soft voice which was like a sexual caress 'I guess you must be Well, it won't be long Ed says you're going to stay'

'If it's all right with you'

She was wearing a pair of stretch pants and a man's shirt, a faded blue He eyed the curve of her buttocks, remembering the body, naked His eyes shifted to her full breasts, straining against the shirt

'We want the money,' she said 'Anyway, as Ed says, it'll be company for me Do you like curry?'

'I like anything'

'Go watch TV It'll be twenty minutes I prefer to cook on my own'

She glanced up and they looked at each other The bright blue eyes ran over his short, heavily-built body, then to his face and their eyes locked

'Call me Johnny,' Johnny said and his voice was a little husky

'Freda' She waved him away 'Keep Ed company . not that he likes company, but he might grow used to it' Johnny caught a bitter note in her voice

Leaving her, he returned to the living-room

Andy Lucas came into Massino's office, closed the door and looked from Massino to Tanza The room was heavy with cigar smoke and there was a half-bottle of whisky, glasses and an ice bucket on the desk

'Well?' Massino snarled

'I've checked,' Andy said 'It's taken time, but I've now talked with every driver who left the bus station between 2 a m and 5 a m on the night of the steal None of them took those bags If they take luggage, they have to issue a ticket . . no luggage'

'So that thins it down,' Tanza said 'He either had someone with him who took the money out or the money is still in town' Massino brooded about this

'So suppose he was on his own Suppose he dumped the money in one of those left-luggage lockers across the street, planning to come back for it? What do you think?'

Tanza shook his head

'He's no fool He must know he couldn't come back It's my bet he was working with someone who took the money out'

Massino nodded

'Looks like it, but just suppose he did dump the money in one of those lockers.' He looked at Andy. 'Can we check?'

'There are over three hundred lockers,' Andy said 'Even the Commissioner couldn't get into them all without a judge's say-so. We could try, but do you want that, Mr Joe?'

Massino thought about this, then shook his head

'No You're right We start a caper like that and the press will get on to it' He thought some more 'But we can seal off those lockers Get it organized, Andy I want a twenty-four-hour watch kept Have two men on four-hour shifts, day and night, watching those lockers. Give them a description of the bags If anyone opens a locker and takes those bags, he's to be nailed'

Andy nodded and left the office

'So what's the organization doing?' Massino demanded

'Take it easy, Joe We'll find him . . . may take a little time, but we'll find him The word's gone out By now, everyone connected with us knows we want him Take a look at this' He produced from his wallet a printer's proof and laid it on the desk 'This will appear in all the Florida newspapers tomorrow morning'

Massino leaned forward and read the proof

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

\$10,000 Reward

Below this headline was Johnny's prison photograph The letterpress went on.

Missing from home, believed suffering from loss of memory·
Johnny Bianda Heavily built, five foot nine inches, clean shaven, sallow complexion, grey-black hair, forty-two years of age Known to favour a St Christopher medal

A reward of \$10,000 will be paid to anyone giving information that will lead to this man being found.

Contact Dyson & Dyson, Attorneys-at-Law,
1600 Crew Street
East City Tel 007 611 09

'He'll hide up with someone without money . . . they always do,' Tanza said with his evil grin 'If this doesn't flush him out, we have other tricks, but I think it will.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

JOHNNY CAME FULLY AWAKE when he heard the phut-phut of a motor boat Lifting his head, he looked out of the open window to see Freda in a small boat, powered by an outboard motor, moving away from the houseboat She was wearing the faded shirt and stretch pants and a cigarette dangled from her lips The boat

headed across the lake. Johnny dropped back on his pillow. He had been woken previously by the sound of the truck starting up, and only half conscious, he realized Scott was off to work.

He lay on the small bed and thought of the previous evening. They had eaten curried Black Crappie, a lake fish, with rice, onions and tomatoes. It had been a good meal, eaten more or less in silence. Scott had wanted to see something on TV and he had eaten fast, then leaving the other two at the table, he had gone over to the set and turned it on.

Johnny had been very aware of Freda as they sat opposite each other. He had eaten hungrily.

'You cook fine,' he said.

'Ed says the same.' The flat in her voice made him look sharply at her. 'That's all men think of. Food.'

He glanced across the room to where Scott was absorbed in the lighted screen.

'Not all men.'

'Have some more.'

'I'd be nuts if I didn't.'

She pushed back her chair.

'We live like pigs here. Go ahead. I've things to do,' and she left the table, going into the kitchen.

The food was so good and he was so hungry, he didn't hesitate. He cleared the bowl, then sat back reaching for a cigarette.

After a short smoke, he crushed out his cigarette, collected the plates and carried them into the kitchen. He was surprised to see her sitting on the deck, staring across the lake.

'Let's clear up,' he said. 'You want to?'

'Sounds like you're domesticated.' There was a slight jeer in her voice. 'Leave it for tomorrow. Tomorrow's another day.'

'I'll do it. You stay there.'

She stared at him, then shrugged.

'So I stay here.'

It took him some twenty minutes to wash the dishes and clear the table. He liked doing this. It reminded him of the safety of his own apartment which seemed far away, then he joined her on the deck and sat beside her in an old, creaking bamboo chair.

'Nice view,' he said.

'You think so? I've got used to it. After two years, a view gets faded. Where are you from?'

'Up north. And you?'

'Sweden.'

'I guessed that. Your hair. Your eyes. You're a long way from home.'

'Yes.' A pause, then she said, 'Look, you don't have to make conversation with me. For two years I've lived more or less on

own I'm used to it You're our lodger I wouldn't have you here if it wasn't for the money I like being alone'

'I won't get in your way' He stood up 'I've had a rough day. I'm turning in Thank you for a fine meal'

She leaned back in her chair and looked up at him

'Thanks for clearing up'

They regarded each other, then he went into the living-room The TV serial had come to an end and Scott was getting to his feet

'Bed,' he said 'See you around seven tomorrow evening You got all you want? The fishing tackle is in that closet there Use my rod if you want to'

'I'll do that' A pause 'Well, good night, I guess I could sleep the clock around'

Johnny went to his room and got into bed He lay watching the moon and the still waters of the lake and he thought of Scott and his woman. Then his mind switched to Massino He drew in a long, relaxed breath Here, he felt safe This surely was the one place on earth where the organization would never think to look for him

And now after a good sleep, with the sun up, seeing Freda in the motorboat, he became fully awake He stripped off and plunged into the lake, swam for some minutes in the cool clear water, then returned to the houseboat, dried off, dressed and went into the kitchen Freda had set out a pot of coffee, a cup and saucer, sugar and milk There was a stale loaf of bread and a toaster, but he didn't bother with that. He carried the cup of coffee on to the deck and sat down, looking at the distant pines, the reflections of the clouds in the lake, the stillness of the water and he felt at peace

After drinking the coffee and smoking a cigarette, he explored the houseboat, finding it consisted of three small bedrooms, beside the living-room, the kitchen and a shower room The bedroom next to his was obviously Freda's The room was neat and clean with a small, single bed, a chest of drawers, a closet, books and a table with a bedside light The room next to hers belonged to Scott not so tidy, no books and the bed also small In one corner stood a .22 target rifle and a shot gun Johnny eyed these two weapons, then backed out of the room, closing the door.

He collected Scott's fishing rod and went out on to the deck He spent the next hour trying to catch fish but he had no luck Still, it was relaxing to sit in the sun, the rod in his hand and he thought of all that money stashed away in the left-luggage locker If he could stay here for a week or so, he decided it would be safe to return and get the money Surely, after six weeks, the heat would be off In a week or so, he would go with Scott to Richville

and from there call Sammy who would be able to tell him what was happening

Another hour drifted while he thought of the moment when he would buy his boat, then he heard the phut-phut of the returning motorboat and out of the sun, he saw Freda at the tiller. He waved at her and she lifted her hand. Ten minutes later she climbed on deck while Johnny secured the boat.

'You'll never catch anything from here,' she said, seeing the rod. 'If you want to fish, take the boat.' She had a loaded shopping basket. 'Lunch in two hours. Take the boat and see if you can get something for supper.'

Johnny had stripped off his shirt and suddenly she looked at his hairy chest and pointed.

'What's that?'

He fingered the St Christopher medal.

'My lucky charm.' He grinned. 'St Christopher. My mother gave it to me. Know what she said just before she died? She said "As long as you have that nothing really bad can happen to you".'

'You're an Italian, aren't you?'

'That's right, but I was born in Florida.'

'Well, don't lose it,' and she carried the basket into the kitchen.

Taking the rod and tackle, he got in the motorboat and started the engine. It was good to be in a boat again, and an hour later when he had landed a four-pound bass, he decided he hadn't spent a nicer morning since he was a kid.

He felt absurdly proud of himself when he carried the bass into the kitchen and saw Freda's look of surprise.

'You're quite a fisherman!' she said. 'Put it down there. I'll attend to it.'

'I've gutted it. . . used to fish a lot when I was a kid: hadn't much else to eat. That smells good.'

'Ed gets a free meal in Richville. I thought I'd spend some of your money.' She looked at him. 'Beef casserole. Like to give me some rent? I've spent all I had.'

'Why, sure.' He went into his bedroom, unlocked the suitcase and took out two ten-dollar bills. Then, returning, he handed them to her.

'Thanks.' She put the money in a shabby little purse.

While they were eating, she asked, 'What do you plan to do? Just sit around here?'

'If I'm not in the way. I'm taking a vacation and this suits me fine.'

'You're easy to please.' The bitter note in her voice made him glance at her.

'Yeah, I can guess it gets monotonous after a time. Ed was telling me about this shrimp contract.'

'He's crazy!' She forked beef into her mouth 'The moment I can lay my hands on some money I'm off! God! I'm sick of this way of life, but we're stuck for money'

'It's tough He seems to work like a slave I'm sorry'

'He works all right, but does he kid himself! He'll never be anything There are finks who slave themselves to death and never amount to anything he's one of them' The bright blue eyes met his 'What do you do for a living?'

'Rent collecting I got fed up with it, sold everything and when my money runs out I'm going to get a job on a boat I'm crazy about boats'

'Boats?' She grimaced 'What sort of living can you make out of boats? Fishing? Is that a living?'

'A living doesn't worry me I just want to get on a boat'

She laid down her knife and fork

'Some ambition'

'And you? If you had enough money to get away from here, what would you do?'

'Live! I'm twenty-six I know men go for me' She stared directly at him 'You go for me, don't you?'

'So what's that to do with it?'

'If I could get to Miami I'd find a man and I'd squeeze every dollar out of him for services rendered You know something? I thought this was the golden land of opportunity when I landed here three years ago Was I green? I spent two months in New York in a travel agency, routing old jerks to Sweden God! Was that a bore! Then I got a transfer down to Jacksonville the same old bore Then one day my unlucky day when I was fed to my back teeth, I had to run into Ed, full of plans of starting up in the haulage business, owning his own truck, in a year owning two trucks, in four years a fleet of trucks really in the money! So I married him! Okay, I asked for it and got it! We came here "Give me a year," he said, "and you'll see Let's rough it for a year, then I'll get another truck" That's two years ago! And what a man! What a man to live with!' She looked directly at Johnny 'Are you on to him?'

'What does that mean?'

'He's kinky High heels and whips So we sleep apart He gets his fun in Richville and I get my fun fishing!'

Johnny lifted his hands and let them fall heavily on his knees 'I'm sorry'

'Don't be' She got to her feet 'Come on, lodger. You want me and I need a man This time it's for free Next time it'll cost you I've got to save money and get out of here or I'll damn well drown myself'

Johnny remained seated

'I want you, Freda, but not on those terms,' he said quietly. 'I've never paid for it and I never will'

She stared at him, then she smiled

'I think I'm going to like you, Johnny,' she said 'I think you're all man No conditions let's see how good you really are'

He got up and putting his arm around her waist, cupping her heavy breast, he went with her into his tiny bedroom

'What's the time?' Her voice sounded lazy and sleepy

Johnny lifted his wrist It was a few minutes after 15 00 She lay naked, her body on his, her blonde head half on his shoulder and half on the pillow

'Just after three'

'Oh, damn! I must go to the village' She swung off him and on to her feet, standing, looking down at him

He looked up, feasting his eyes on her suntanned body. He reached up to touch her, but she moved out of his reach.

'Do you want to come with me?'

He very nearly said he would, then he remembered it would be safer to keep out of sight, to keep away from the village.

'I guess I'll stay What have you got to go for?'

'The mail if any and the newspaper Ed likes the newspaper'

'Anything I can do while you're away?'

'You've done enough' She smiled down at him 'You're not much to look at but you know how to satisfy a woman'

'Good?'

'Hmmm' She went away and reaching for a cigarette Johnny lit up, then relaxed on the bed

She had been good too, he thought starving for it. He lay there, thinking about her for the next half hour, then getting off the bed, he took a swim

He was dressed and sitting on the deck when she returned in the motorboat The time now was 16 30 He helped her scramble up on deck, then tied up the boat

'Want to see the paper?' She offered it to him 'I'll stuff the bass,' and she left him

Newspapers seldom interested Johnny except to read the Sport's news He glanced at the headlines, found nothing to hold his attention, turned to page two, paused to read an account of a girl who had been found raped and murdered, grimaced, then flicked through the rest of the pages until he came to the funnies He read "Peanuts" and grinned, then as he was turning to the sport's page a headline caught his eyes

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

\$10,000 Reward

Her eyes widened 'Mafia?'

'That's right'

She put down the paper 'I don't understand and he could see she was shaken, but not so shaken that it curtailed her curiosity

'You don't want to understand'

'Are you a mafioso?'

'No'

'Then why are they offering all this money?'

'They want to find me and kill me,' Johnny said quietly

She flinched 'Kill you? Why?'

'I did something bad to them'

She stared at him for several moments, then she tore the page containing the advert from the paper and offered it to him

'You'd better burn this, hadn't you? Ten thousand is a lot of money. If Ed sees it he could be tempted. It only means a telephone call, doesn't it?'

'You mean you wouldn't be tempted?'

'Do you think I would?'

He shrugged helplessly 'As you said, it's a lot of money. You want money. I don't know.'

She got to her feet 'I'm going for a swim.'

'Wait. I want you to understand I...'

She had pulled off her shirt, struggled out of her stretch pants and panties and dived into the lake.

Johnny set fire to the sheet of newspaper, then tossed it still burning into the water. He found he was shaking. He sat there, staring at her bobbing head, watching her swim further and further away. Could he trust her? In the night, might she not start thinking of what that money could mean to her? *It only means a telephone call, doesn't it?* She would go across the lake to the village tomorrow. He wouldn't know if she had telephoned or not until Toni, Ernie and the rest of the mob arrived. He wiped the sweat off his face. He had better get out. Pack now and clear out. Yet he didn't move. It dawned on him that this woman meant more to him than any woman he had ever met.

Suppose he decided to trust her? Suppose he stayed on? What about Scott? Sooner or later he would see the advert, but he knew nothing about the medal. It was the medal that alerted Freda. He was sure of that. It was the medal that had given him away. Why should Scott connect him with the advert? The photo was taken twenty years ago.

With shaking fingers he undid the chain around his neck and stared at the medal, lying in his palm.

As long as you wear this, nothing really bad can happen to you.

He thought of his mother—a poor, ignorant, superstitious peasant! Goddamn it! Twice the medal had landed him in real

trouble! If it hadn't been for the medal he wouldn't now be in hiding. If it hadn't been for the medal Freda wouldn't have guessed who he was.

He stood up.

Away in the distance he could see Freda swimming. The sun was beginning to sink behind the pines.

Lifting his hand, he threw the medal and chain with all his strength into the gathering dusk.

He watched the tiny splash as the medal hit the water.

It was done! It couldn't betray him again!

He was sitting on the deck when she came out of the lake, water streaming off her golden body. She picked up her clothes and walked past him into the living-room.

The sun made a red rim around the pines. In another hour, Scott would be back.

During the time she had been swimming, Johnny had thought about her. He had come to the conclusion that this was his woman. He had never had this feeling before. He told himself he was crazy. What did he know about her except there was something in those blue eyes that told him he could trust her.

You mean you wouldn't be tempted?

Did you think I would?

And that look, surprise, then the hurt showed and she had thrown off her clothes and had swum away from him.

That wasn't the action of treachery. Surely, if she planned to betray him, she wouldn't have behaved like that.

Then she was beside him, dressed and sitting down. She looked seriously at him.

'I think we'd better talk, Johnny,' she said. 'Do you think, by staying here, Ed and I will be in danger?'

He hesitated, then nodded.

'Yes.' He paused, then went on. 'I'll get Ed to drive me to Richville tomorrow, and then forget about me. It's the best way.'

'I don't want to forget you. I'm in love with you,' and she put her hand on his.

He felt a surge of emotion go through him. Many women had told him they loved him. Melanie had, often enough, but none of them had said it the way this woman said it.

'That makes two of us, but I'd better go.'

'Could we talk about it?' The slim fingers fondled his wrist. 'Could you explain?'

The caressing fingers lulled his caution.

Speaking quietly, staring across the dark waters of the lake, he told her the story of his life. He told her of his yearning to own a boat, about Massino, how Massino had cheated him. He told her

about the Big Take, but he didn't tell her how much money was involved

'I have the money stashed away in East City. If it wasn't for the medal there would have been no problem. I could have stayed there. Massino wouldn't have suspected me. Then later, I would have taken the money and ducked out.'

'Is there much money?' she asked.

He looked at her. Her face was expressionless and she wasn't looking at him.

'Enough.'

'If you got the money would you take me away from here?'

'Yes.'

'Would you choose between me and your boat? Would you give up your boat to keep me?'

He didn't hesitate.

'No. You either go with the boat or I'll stake you and we part. I'm risking my life for the boat. It's that important to me.'

She nodded. 'I'm glad I said it before and I'll say it again. You're all man. I'll come with you and I'll help on the boat.'

'If they find me here, they could kill you.'

'If I'm going to share this money with you, Johnny, I must share the risk. That's fair, isn't it?'

Think about it. Let's talk about it tomorrow. I've still got to get the money.'

'Where have you hidden it?'

He smiled at her. 'Where they won't think of looking for it.'

'Isn't it dangerous to go back for it?'

'Yes. It's a hell of a risk.'

'But I could get it, couldn't I? They don't know me.'

A tiny red light of warning lit up in Johnny's mind. Suppose he told her where the money was? Suppose he gave her the locker key? She could hire a car and drive to East City, take the two bags, load them into the car and that would be the last time he would ever see her. How can anyone trust anyone when there was so much money involved? She said she loved him. She had said it in such a way that he believed her, but when she dragged those two heavy bags out of the locker might she not be tempted to betray him?

He remembered what she had said. *You're not much to look at.* He wasn't. He was fourteen years older than she. With all that money, with her looks, she could make a wonderful life for herself without having a short, heavily-built man of forty-two in her hair.

The sound of the approaching truck saved him from answering.

'Here's Ed. We'll talk tomorrow.'

'Yes.'

She got up and went hastily into the kitchen

Scott had his swim, admired the bass Johnny had caught, then came out on deck, joining Johnny while Freda cooked the dinner

'Had a good day?' Scott asked, lighting a cigarette. He looked slyly at Johnny

'Fine. And you?'

'The usual.' Scott flicked ash into the lake. 'Did she give out?'

Johnny stiffened. 'Come again?'

'Did you lay her?'

'Look, Ed, cut that talk out! I don't like it. She's your wife! Haven't you any respect for her?'

Scott gave a sneering laugh. 'I told you I couldn't care less. I was just curious to know if you made it.'

'Like I said—cut it out!'

Scott eyed him. 'Maybe you like it fancy. I do. If ever you want something fancy come to Richville with me. I know a couple of chicks.'

'I'm a lot older than you, Ed. You look after your sex life and I'll look after mine. Okay?'

Scott studied him, then shrugged.

'Yeah. I guess when I get as old as you, it won't be a problem.' He gave a sly grin. 'I bet Freda's disappointed. I get the idea she's itching for it.'

'Then why don't you give it to her?' Johnny tried to soften his voice, but his anger showed.

'She's not my style.'

Johnny suddenly hated this man as he had seldom hated any man. He got to his feet as Freda came on to the deck.

'You can eat,' she said.

It was while they were finishing the bass that Scott said, 'You got a younger brother, Johnny?'

Johnny became instantly alert. He paused to finish the last morsel of fish on his plate, then shook his head.

'I've no relations.'

'Just an idea.' Scott pushed aside his plate. 'There's an odd ad in the *Richville Times*. I have it here.' He shoved back his chair and crossing to where he had left his jacket, he took out a folded newspaper.

Johnny and Freda exchanged quick glances as Scott put the paper in front of Johnny.

'What do you think of that... ten thousand dollars!'

Johnny pretended to read the letterpress, shrugged and reached for a cigarette.

'Funny thing,' Scott went on. 'I looked up suddenly just now and you seem to resemble this photograph. I wondered if it could be a young brother.'

'Never had a brother,' Johnny said
Scott passed the newspaper to Freda
'Don't you think this guy looks like Johnny?'

Freda glanced at the photograph

'Maybe' Her voice was casual 'You can't say Johnny is exactly an oil painting, can you?' and getting up, she began to collect the plates Johnny helped her while Scott continued to stare at the photograph

Out in the kitchen, Freda washed up while Johnny dried They didn't speak, but both were aware of tension

Returning to the living-room, they found Scott still staring at the ad Freda went out on deck and as Johnny followed her, Scott said, 'Funny sort of ad, isn't it?'

Johnny paused and came back to the table He sat down

'It sure is'

'What do you imagine the idea is offering all this money for a guy who's lost his memory?'

'Rich parents, I guess' anxious to find him'

Scott studied the photograph

'Doesn't look as if he comes from rich parents, does he?' He glanced at Johnny 'Bit on the rough side. like you and me'

'Yeah'

'Ten thousand dollars! If I had all that money I'd buy me three more trucks and I'd really be in the business' Scott's face lit up. 'Finding drivers is easy, but getting capital for trucks is something else'

'Ever thought of doubling your turn-over without buying more trucks?' Johnny asked, anxious to get Scott's mind off the ad.

'How?'

'You deliver crates of shrimps to Richville right?'

'So?'

'But you come back empty Can't you get freight from Richville to bring back to New Symara?'

'Do you imagine I haven't thought of that?' Scott said scornfully 'You go out and sniff the truck It stinks of shrimps No one wants haulage that stinks that bad I've tried, and anyway, there's nothing in Richville that New Symara wants.'

'Just an idea' Johnny got to his feet 'I guess I'll turn in. See you'

Scott nodded

Johnny left him still staring at the ad.

Lying in his little bed, watching the moon while he thought, Johnny wasn't ready for sleep. He thought of Freda Suppose he could trust her? She would be safe going to the Greyhound bus station and getting the money. But could he trust her? Then his

mind switched to Scott. Had he convinced him that he had no connection with the ad?

He closed his eyes, trying to force himself to sleep. Then he became alert. He heard Freda enter her room. What a woman! His mind dwelt on the three times they had made love and he had the urge to leave his bed and go into her room and take her again.

Then a slight sound made him stiffen. His door was gently opening. He lay still, his hand reaching under his pillow for his gun.

The moonlight coming through the open window shone directly on the door and through half-closed eyes he saw Scott was looking at him through the half-open door.

Johnny emitted a soft snore, watching Scott who stood there, still, listening. Johnny snored again and the door closed silently.

What did this mean? he asked himself, now fully awake. He listened. He heard Freda's door open.

'Come out on deck.' Scott's whisper came clearly to Johnny. 'Don't say anything'—he's asleep.

Johnny waited. He heard soft movements, then silence. He slid out of his bed, opened his door and peered into the moon-lit living-room. He saw Scott and Freda through the window. They were on the deck. Moving like a ghost, he crept into the living-room as he heard Scott say, 'Look at this.'

He had a flashlight in his hand and he was directing the beam on to a sheet of newsprint. Johnny knew at once it was the ad. He moved further forward.

'See?' Scott said, his voice low and excited. 'I've pencilled a beard on him. It's Johnny!'

'What are you talking about?' Freda's voice was also a whisper but it came clearly to Johnny. 'This man's twenty years younger.' 'Could be an old photograph.'

They were standing side by side by the deck rail. Scott was wearing pyjamas. Freda had a shortie nightdress. Johnny could see her long legs through the moon-lit flimsy material.

'Sit down. I want to talk to you.'

Johnny watched them move to the bamboo chairs and sit, side by side. He moved forward so he now stood in the darkness within three feet of them, listening through the open window behind them.

'I've been thinking about this,' Scott said. 'This missing man is Johnny Bianda. Our lodger calls himself Johnny Bianco. For all we know he has lost his memory and imagines he's Bianco and not Bianda. The more I look at this photo, now I've put on the beard, the surer I am this is the man they want. Ten thousand dollars! Imagine! What do you think?'

Johnny held his breath. What she would say must tell him if he could trust her or not.

'He doesn't act like a man who's lost his memory,' Freda's voice was calm. 'We were talking this afternoon. He was telling me about his rent-collection experiences. No . . . you're pipe dreaming.'

'Suppose I call these people Dyson & Dyson? Where's the harm? They can send someone to take a look at him. They will probably have dozens of people telephoning so what have we to lose? We might hit the jackpot.'

'And if we do what happens?'

'Ten thousand dollars! You want to leave me, don't you? You've had enough of this, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

'Fine. So I give you two thousand and with the rest I buy three more trucks and I'm in business. Tomorrow, I'll call these people from Richville. If we're unlucky, it's too bad, but if we aren't . . .'

Johnny's heart now was thumping so hard he was scared they would hear.

'Let's make sure,' Freda said. 'I'll send him out fishing tomorrow and while he's on the lake, I'll go through his things. This thing about a St Christopher medal. He might have one. If I find it, we'll know for sure it's him.'

'What's wrong with me telephoning tomorrow? They can but look at him.'

A pause, then she said, 'Can't you use your brains? If we are really sure we can ask for more . . . we could ask for fifteen thousand. Five for me and ten for you.'

'I hadn't thought of that. Yeah . . . but you don't get five, baby. You'll get four.'

'So all right. I get four.'

Scott stood up. 'You check his things. Imagine! Fifteen thousand dollars!'

Johnny moved silently back to his bedroom, closed the door and lay on the bed.

So he could trust her! She was clever! She had gained a day but what then?

There was no sleep for him that night.

Carlo Tanza came into Massino's office, kicked the door shut and dumped his heavy body into a chair.

'We've certainly started something with that ad!' he exclaimed. 'Already it has produced three hundred and forty-nine telephone calls. Dyson is flipping his lid. Every call has to be checked out.'

Massino glared at him. 'It was your bright idea.'

'It was a good idea, but how was I to know so many bastards

resemble this bastard? So, okay, we're checking them out but it's going to take time'

'That's your business,' Massino said 'I pay you produce One thing I do know, if the money is in one of those lockers across the street, the sonofabitch will never get it that's something I'm damn well certain about!'

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SOUND OF THE TRUCK had scarcely died away when Johnny's bedroom door opened and Freda came in.

In the grey light of the dawn she looked to Johnny the most desirable woman in the world, but this was no time for love

She sat on the side of his bed

'He talked to me last night,' she said

'I know I heard every word,' Johnny said and put his hand on hers. 'You played it smart, but when he comes back tonight . . . what's going to happen?'

'I'll tell him I'm sure you're not the man he thinks you are I'll tell him I've seen your driving licence and it's in the name of Bianco I'll say there's no St Christopher medal'

Johnny shook his head

'That won't stop him He's money hungry As he said, what's there to lose except the price of a telephone call?'

'Then let's get out of here,' Freda said 'Let's get the money and get lost I know where I can hire a car in the village We'll drive to East City, pick up the money, then head north? What do you say?'

He lay back on his pillow and marvelled at her ignorance of the net that was closing around him

'If only it could be as simple as that,' he said

'But they don't know me!' Freda said impatiently 'Where have you hidden the money? Why can't I get it while you wait, out of sight?'

'East City is swarming with Massino's men Every one of them will have a description of the bags holding the money Two shabby red hold-alls with black leather handles,' Johnny said 'Anyone carrying two such bags wouldn't survive five minutes'

'Then we'll buy a trunk and put the two bags in the trunk . . . what's the matter with that?'

Johnny now felt he had to tell her everything

'The bags are in a left-luggage locker in the Greyhound bus station, right opposite Massino's office You couldn't load them into a trunk without being seen'

'But there must be some way I could get them!'

'Massino's sharp. Maybe he has thought of the lockers. Maybe he has them staked out. Before we do anything, I've got to check.' Johnny thought for a moment. 'Where's the nearest call booth?'

'In the village. the local store.'

'I've a contact in East City. He'll tell me what's happening. How soon does the store open?'

'Seven-thirty.'

He looked at his watch. The time was 05 30.

'Will you take me across in the boat?'

She hesitated. 'They're all eyes and ears over there. So far, they don't know you exist. You could cause a sensation.'

'I've got to get to a phone.'

She thought for a long moment.

'Suppose I tell Salvatore you're my step-brother on a visit? Be nice to him. He's easy to con. you just have to be nice to him.'

'An Italian?' Johnny stiffened. 'Who's he?'

'He owns the store. Salvatore Bruno. He's harmless. If we time our arrival as the store opens, no one will be around. You really mean you must phone?'

'Yes.'

'You mean once you know it will be all right, we can hire a car and get the money?'

'I've got to know first.'

She nodded. 'I'll get coffee. There's time.'

He reached out and pulled her down on him.

'There's also time for coffee.'

The motorboat drifted into the little harbour. Johnny could see the store, a low, ramshackle building, facing the waterfront. He glanced at his watch. It was a minute after 07 30 and he saw the door leading into the store, was standing open.

He was wearing his bush jacket to conceal his gun and holster. His eyes darted along the waterfront but there was no sign of life.

Freda jumped on to the quay. Johnny tossed the rope to her and she secured the boat. Together they crossed the dirt road and walked into the store.

'The phone's there,' Freda said and pointed.

As Johnny stepped into the call booth, he saw a short, fat man come out from behind a curtain. He shut the door, then turned his back and inserted coins. He called Sammy's apartment.

There was a delay, then Sammy's sleepy voice came over the line. 'Who's this?'

'Sammy! Wake up! This is Johnny!'

'Who?'

'Johnny!'

A low moan of fear came over the line

'Listen, Sammy . what's happening there? What's the news?'

'Mr Johnny . I asked you . . . I begged you not to contact me, I could get into real trouble I . '

'Cut it out, Sammy! You're my friend . . remember? What's happening?'

'I don't know I don't know nothin' No one talks any more, Mr Johnny I swear I don't know nothin'!'

'I want you to do something for me, Sammy '

'Me? Haven't I done enough, Mr Johnny? You've got all my money. Cloe keeps worrying me for money and I've got none now to give her My brother '

'Skip it, Sammy! I told you you'll get your money back Now listen carefully You know the Greyhound bus station?'

'Yeah I know it '

'When you have driven the boss to his office, go in there and buy a newspaper. Wander around I want to know if any of the mob are staked out there You getting this, Sammy?'

'They *are* staked out there, Mr Johnny. Don't ask me why, but they are I went in there last night to get cigarettes and Toni and Ernie were hanging around '

Johnny nodded to himself So Massino suspected the money was in one of those lockers.

'Okay, Sammy Now don't worry about your money. I'll send it to you soon,' and he hung up

For a long moment, Johnny stood staring at the coin box It was a matter of patience For how long would Massino have the lockers watched? He could not know the money was there he was guessing. This had to be thought about. How to deal with Scott tonight?

He pushed open the booth door and moved into the store

'Johnny! Come and meet Salvatore,' Freda called She was standing by one of the counters. On the other side was the short, fat man who thrust out his hand

'Glad to meet you,' he said with a wide smile 'Big surprise Mrs Freda never told me she had a half-brother Welcome to Little Creek '

As Johnny shook hands, he took this man in with a quick searching glance: balding, around sixty, a bushy moustache, small, intelligent eyes and a stubbly chin

'Passing through,' he said 'Got business in Miami Nice store you have here.'

'Yeah, yeah, it's all right' The little eyes dwelt on Johnny's face 'You Italian like me?'

'My mother was Italian,' Johnny said 'Our old man was a Swede.' He looked at Freda who nodded

'Mother comes out in you, huh?'

'You can say that '

'Yeah ' A pause. 'You staying long?'

'It's pretty nice up here. I'm in no hurry to get to work.' Johnny forced a laugh 'I heard a lot about this place when Freda wrote, but I had no idea it's as good as this '

'You fish?'

'I like it Yesterday, I landed a four-pounder first try . . a bass '

Salvadore beamed 'So you're a fisherman '

'Could I have two pounds of bacon and a dozen eggs,' Freda broke in

'In a moment

Salvadore hurried to another counter Johnny and Freda exchanged glances They didn't say anything

Ten minutes later, after more talk, they walked across the quay to the boat

Salvadore watched them go The benign expression on his fat face slowly faded and his little eyes became like marbles

He reached under the counter and produced yesterday's *Florida Times* Quickly, he thumbed through the pages until he came to the Have You Seen This Man? advertisement He stared for several moments at the photograph, then taking a pencil from behind his ear, he carefully pencilled in a beard After staring at the photograph again, he crossed to the call booth, inserted a coin and dialled a number

A growling voice replied

'Bruno Little Creek,' Salvadore said 'This guy Johnny Bianda. There's a guy just arrived, calling himself Johnny who looks like him '

'What guy?'

Salvadore talked

'If she says he's her half-brother why the hell can't he be her half-brother?'

'This doll isn't getting it from her husband It's my bet she'd say anything to get it and it's my bet this guy is giving it to her '

'Okay I'll send someone to take a look. We've got hundreds of goddamn suspects to check out, but I'll send someone '

'When?'

'How do I know? When I've got a man free '

'If it's him, I get the reward?'

'If it's him,' and the line went dead

The noise of the outboard engine made conversation impossible. Johnny sat in the prow of the boat, his mind active The store-keeper had alerted his sense of danger. He had had to phone Sammy, but now he realized the risk he had taken There were

Mafiosi everywhere So they were watching the lockers at the Greyhound bus station! As he sat in the prow of the boat, feeling the breeze against his face, watching the prow cut through the still waters, he felt the net closing in on him

When he had tied up and had followed Freda on to the deck of the houseboat, he dropped into one of the bamboo chairs

'Well?'

She stood over him and he looked up into her bright blue eyes

'They're watching the lockers'

The disappointment in her eyes made him uneasy She was so money hungry, he thought She sat by his side

'So what do we do?'

'That's right so what do we do?' He thought, staring across the lake 'When I planned this steal, baby, I told myself I would have to be patient I told myself it wouldn't be safe spending that money for a couple of years'

She stiffened 'Two years?'

'As long as the money stays in the locker, it's safe Try and move it and you and me are dead and the money goes back to Massino Sooner or later, he'll get tired of watching the lockers It might take a month even six months, but I have my contact in East City He'll tell me when the heat's off and until it's off, we have to wait'

'You're not planning to stay here six months, are you?'

'No . I've got to find myself a job I'm handy with boats I'll go to Tampa I'll find something there'

'And what about me?' The hard note in her voice made him look at her She was staring at him, her eyes glittering.

'I've some money It'll be rough like this, but if you want to come, I'd like to have you with me.'

'How much money did you take from this man, Johnny? You haven't told me'

And he wasn't going to tell her

'Around fifty thousand,' he said.

'You're risking your life for fifty thousand?'

'That's it I want to own a boat I can get one for that money'

She stared at him and he saw she didn't believe him.

'It's more than that, isn't it? You don't trust me'

'I don't know I never got around to counting it My guess is fifty, but it could be more . . could be less'

She sat still, thinking

He watched her, then said quietly, 'You're wondering if ten thousand in the hand is better than fifty thousand in the bush, aren't you?'

She stiffened, then shook her head 'No I'm trying to imagine myself on a boat,' but he knew she was lying.

'Don't do anything you'll regret,' he said 'Look, suppose when you go over for the mail you call these attorneys Let me tell you what will happen Five or six men will arrive They'll try to take me alive, because dead, they will never find the money One thing I'm sure about no one takes me alive I've seen what happens to men who have tried to double-cross Massino He has them tied to chairs and beats them with a baseball bat careful not to kill them, breaking their bones and then he finally sticks a butcher's hook in their throats and hangs them in the chair until they die so no one is taking me alive So there will be a gun battle and during the gun battle you'll stop a bullet. Believe me, baby, no one will live to collect that ten-thousand-dollar reward. that's just bait So don't do anything you'll regret'

She shivered, then put her hand on his

'I wouldn't betray you, Johnny I swear I wouldn't, but what about Ed?'

'Yeah, I've been thinking about him Here's what you tell him. You tried to get into my suitcase while I was fishing, but it was locked So when I got back, you went over to collect the mail and the newspaper You telephoned these attorneys and said you thought the man they were looking for was in Little Creek And what do you imagine they said?' Johnny looked at her 'They said the man had been found in Miami and they thanked you for calling them and they were sorry you had been troubled How will Ed react to that?'

She relaxed 'That's smart He won't want to spend more money on a long distance Yes, he'll drop it'

'That's the way I figured it I can stay here until the end of the week, then I'll tell him I'm moving on We'll hire that car you talked about and we'll go to Tampa'

'Why wait? Why not go tomorrow?'

'That's not the way to play it. During the next five days, you're going to fall in love with me and you'll leave him a letter telling him so and that you and me are going off together Rush it and he'll get suspicious He might even phone these attorneys He might ask at the village and find out what car we've hired. Then we wouldn't get far, baby Believe me, this is a game of patience'

'Wait! That's all I do! Wait!' Freda got to her feet 'God! I'm sick of this life!'

'It's better to be sick of life than not have a life' Johnny stood up 'I'll go get some supper'

He left her and went to his room Closing the door, he slid the bolt Then taking out a spare khaki shirt, he felt in the breast pocket From it he took the key to the left-luggage locker He looked at it for a brief moment Engraved on it was the number of the locker. 176 the key to \$186,000'

Sitting on the bed, he untied his shoe lace, put the key into his shoe and then tightened the lace. It wasn't comfortable, but it was safe!

A few minutes later he returned to the deck

Freda was in the living-room, using the vacuum cleaner

'I'll be back,' he called, then went to the boat, started the engine and headed out to the middle of the lake

The telephone bell rang just as Massino was about to leave his office for home

'Get it!' he barked to Lu Berilli who scooped up the receiver

'It's Mr Tanza,' he said and offered the receiver

Cursing, Massino snatched the receiver from him, sat on the corner of his desk and said, 'What is it, Carlo? I'm just going home'

'Just had a hot tip come in,' Carlo said 'Could be nothing, but could be something. A man answering to Bianda's description is living in a houseboat near Little Creek—that's five miles from New Symara. He's been there about two days and living with a man and his wife. The woman has hot pants. The husband is a trucker and away all day. She's Swedish and says this guy is her half-brother. He's as Italian as we are. This is a straight tip and the source is reliable'

'So why bother me?' Massino demanded 'You're looking for him, aren't you? Well, check this punk out'

'We want one of your boys to identify him. No point in starting anything without being sure. Can you send someone?'

'Okay. I'll send Toni'

'Fine. Tell him to fly to New Symara and then take a taxi to the Waterfront Bar. All the taxi drivers know it. He's to ask for Luigi. He's our contact man. He'll fix it. Toni has three or four men who'll take him to Little Creek. Okay?'

Massino scribbled on a pad

'Yeah,' he said and hung up. He turned to Berilli 'Find Toni. Give him this. He's to fly on the first flight out. Tell him his job is to identify some guy Tanza thinks is Bianda. Get going!'

Berilli found Toni drinking beer with Ernie in a bar, all Massino's men frequented. Toni and Ernie had just come off a long, boring stint of watching the left-luggage lockers and Toni was griping

Ernie, who never minded a job where he could sit and do nothing, was listening with a bored expression on his fat face

'Look who's here,' he said when he saw Berilli come in

'That creep!' Toni sneered 'What's he good for?'

Berilli came over and sat at their table

'You have yourself a job' He hated Toni and it pleased him

to be the conveyor of bad news 'The boss says you're to fly right away to New Symara wherever the hell that is Here . . . it's all written down'

Toni took the scrap of paper, read it and then looked blankly at Berilli 'What the hell's this all about?' he demanded

'This guy Luigi says they think they've spotted Johnny They want someone to go down there and identify him before they move in'

'Johnny?'

Toni lost colour

'Yeah The boss says for you to take off right away'

'That'll be the time,' Ernie said and chortled 'When you face Johnny Man! Would I like to be a long distant witness!'

Toni cursed him 'You're sure the boss picked me?'

Berilli sneered at him 'You call him Don't you want the job?'

Toni licked his lips, aware the two men were watching him and grinning He got to his feet and left the bar

Johnny got back to the houseboat around midday with three fair-sized Black Crappie He had been uncomfortable wearing his bush jacket but he had to wear it to hide his gun and holster. From now on, he told himself, he wouldn't move without his gun His instinct for danger was alert While fishing, he had thought of Salvatore The fat man had been friendly, but that didn't mean a thing Everywhere there was a Mafia contact He remembered Salvatore saying *You Italian like me?* On the face of it a harmless remark, but it could also point to trouble

All the same the peace of the lake, the quietness, the fact no one came near, although he could see distant boats, gave him a feeling of security, but he would carry his gun

He dumped the fish into the kitchen sink There was no sign of Freda He went into his room, then kneeling, he looked under the bed and he smiled

He had placed the suitcase at a slight angle and now it was straight That could only mean Freda had touched it He pulled it out and examined the locks They were flimsy enough and it was possible she had a key that could open them He unlocked the case and counted the ten-dollar bills Of Sammy's money, he had left \$2,857 He relocked the case and pushed it under the bed, then he went up on deck

He sat in the sun for more than an hour, then he heard Freda crossing the creaky jetty

'Hi! Where have you been?' he asked as she came around the deck and joined him

'A walk Did you get any fish?'

'Three Black Crappie.'

'God! Crappie again!'

'The bass were shy.'

She went to the rail and stood against it, her hands on the rail, her body slightly bent forward. Johnny eyed the soft sweep of her buttocks. He came up behind her, his hands cupping her breasts, his body against her softness.

She slid away from him.

'Skip it!' she said, her voice hard. 'We can't spend all the week -----' She used the ugly four-letter word and it shocked Johnny.

'Take it easy,' he said. 'This is a game of patience.'

'I'll fix the fish.' He had a definite feeling that she was now hostile. 'Eggs and bacon for lunch.'

'Fine.'

He watched her walk into the kitchen. This woman could be tricky. He thought of Melanie, no trickiness there. He sat for a long moment, his mind active. Freda must learn he was the boss. If she didn't recognize this fact, he could be in danger.

Getting to his feet, he walked into the kitchen. Freda was washing the fish and she glanced over her shoulder.

'What do you want?'

'Dry your hands.'

'I'm busy. go sit in the sun.'

He jerked her around and slapped her face. He was careful not to hit her too hard, but the slap was hard enough to jerk her head back. Her blue eyes blazed and her hand dropped on a kitchen knife by the fish.

He caught her wrist, squeezed and the knife dropped to the floor, then he caught hold of her, pinning her arms to her sides and shoving her out of the kitchen, he forced her along the passage to his room.

'Let me go!' she exclaimed.

She was strong and hard to hold but he handled her. He got her into his room, kicked the door shut, then released her.

'Get them off or I'll rip them off!' he said.

'Who do you imagine you are?' Her eyes were blazing with fury. 'You'll have me when I want you and not before! Now get out!'

To Johnny who in the past had been in many brawls, she was pathetically easy. He weaved as she struck at him, her clawed fingers hopelessly out of range. Then he had her on her back on the bed, her wrists now gripped in his hand.

'Going to behave, baby, or do I really get rough?'

She stared up at him, and relaxed. 'I'll behave.'

He released her wrists, undid her belt and pulled the stretch pants off her.

Later, she said, 'I'm starving' She ran her fingers down his hard back 'I love you You're all man Whatever you say, whatever you do is all right with me'

She slid off the bed and went away

While he dressed, he heard the sizzling sound of bacon cooking He went into the kitchen Freda, naked, was cracking eggs into the pan

He came up behind her and stroked her buttocks

'Stop it, Johnny, or we don't eat'

While they were eating, Johnny said, 'In five days from now, you and me will be on the road together starting a new life'

Freda smiled at him 'I want it! Johnny you don't know how much I want it!'

They spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on the deck, soaking up the sun Around 18 30, Freda said, 'I'll start supper. You take a walk Don't get back for an hour I must convince Ed'

'I'll take the boat, maybe I'll catch a bass'

'If it's Black Crappie, put it back'

Well away from the houseboat, Johnny sat in the boat and thought of her He wondered too what Melanie was doing If she had found someone to replace him He wondered what Massino was doing Probably taking his fat, spoilt wife on some shindig During the hour, he caught four Black Crappie and put them back, then he turned the boat and headed back to the houseboat

As he got on deck, he saw Scott hosing down his truck He waved and Scott waved back. He went into the kitchen

Freda nodded 'It's all right There's nothing for us to worry about He's dropped it'

Johnny drew in a slow deep breath 'You're sure?'

'I'm sure'

A little after 11 15 an air-taxi landed at the New Symara airport and from it came Toni Cappello.

Ten minutes later a taxi dropped him outside the Waterfront Bar. He regarded the outside of the building and was surprised This joint, he decided, had a lot of style Situated opposite the yacht basin, the swank district of New Symara, the Waterfront Bar was the haunt of the rich Tables, shaded by gaily coloured umbrellas, stood before the building which was painted white with sky-blue wooden shutters There was a red carpet leading into the bar over which was a blue-and-white, barrel-shaped canopy The tables were crowded with fat, rich-looking people off their yachts.

Toni felt a little shabby as he walked into the bar, carrying his suitcase. He was aware people were staring at him and he now wished his clothes matched theirs.

An Italian in a white jacket and blood-red trousers, intercepted him 'You want something?' The contempt in the man's voice gave Toni a rush of blood to his head

'Luigi, you punk,' he snarled, 'and hurry it up!'

The waiter's eyes bulged

'Signor Moro is busy'

'Tell him Massino,' Toni said 'He's expecting me!'

The waiter's contempt went away He pointed

'Excuse me Please go ahead First door behind the bar'

Toni found Luigi Moro behind a desk as big as a billiard table He was scribbling figures on a scratch pad and as Toni walked in, he leaned back in his chair and nodded

Luigi Moro was around sixty-five years of age, enormously fat, his nose slightly flattened—a gift from a tough cop when he had been young—his dark, shifty eyes as animated as the eyes of a dead fish.

'Sit down have a cigar' He waved to a chair and pushed a silver box containing Havanas in Toni's direction

Toni wasn't a cigar smoker He sat down on the edge of the chair He had heard about Luigi Moro, one of the Mafia's favourites a man people had to respect or there was trouble

Moro lit a cigar, taking his time, looking thoughtfully at Toni

'I've heard about you you're good with a gun'

Toni nodded

'How's Joe?'

'He's okay.'

'A big steal' Moro laughed 'I bet he's flipping his lid'

Toni didn't say anything

'We got this tip,' Moro said. 'We've got over a hundred tips but this one looks good I've got all my men out checking other tips so suppose you go out to Little Creek and take a gander? It could be negative and I don't want to pull my boys off the work they're doing You take a gander and if it's straight up, call me and we'll go out there and get him'

Toni felt a chill go up his spine

'Don't you send anyone with me?'

Moro stared at him

'I told you . . . the boys are busy' He flicked ash into the big, silver ash-tray on his desk 'You're Massino's top gunman, aren't you?'

'Yeah'

'Fine You can handle this' He pressed a button on his desk and a minute or so later the door opened and a young long-haired Italian came in 'Take this guy to Little Creek, Leo, wise him up Introduce him to Salvatore Tell the old buzzard my compliments'

The young man stared at Toni, then jerked his head to the door. Toni followed him out into the passage, hating him. A possible homo—very lean, white-faced, glittering eyes, could be on pot.

In silence they walked out of the building by the back exit to a shabby Lincoln. Leo slid under the wheel and Toni got in the passengers' seat. Leo turned and stared at Toni.

'I heard about you . . . a trigger man.' He grinned, showing good white teeth. 'Rather you than me.'

'Get going,' Toni snarled. 'Rest the lip.'

'Tough too?' Leo laughed. 'You watch the telly?'

'Get moving!'

Leo opened the glove compartment and dropped a pair of powerful field glasses in Toni's lap. 'They're for you.'

Thirty minutes later, they pulled up outside Salvadore Bruno's store.

'This is where I kiss you off,' Leo said. 'Have a ball. If it's him, call us. Okay?'

The time now was 11.45. There was some activity on the waterfront. As Toni got out of the car he was aware people were looking curiously at him. He slung the field glasses by their strap on his shoulder and walked into the store as Leo drove away.

Salvadore was busy serving customers. When he saw Toni, he called and his fat wife appeared to take over.

Salvadore beckoned to Toni who followed him behind the curtain and into Salvadore's living-room.

'You from Luigi?'

'Yeah.'

Salvadore opened a drawer in the table and took out a large-scale map.

'Here's where we are. Here's where he is,' he said, pointing with a pencil. 'You can take my boat or you can take my car and drive around the lake.'

Toni blotted sweat off his face with his sleeve.

'Maybe the boat is better.'

He didn't want to get too close to Johnny if this suspect was Johnny.

'Yes. There are always fishermen on the lake.' Salvadore eyed the field glasses. 'With those you can see without being seen. I'll loan you a fishing rod. Just go out on the lake and act you're fishing. Okay?'

'Yeah.'

A pause, then Salvadore said, 'If it's him, I get the reward. . . yes?'

'How the hell do I know?' Toni snarled. 'Why the hell should I care anyway?'

'That's no way to talk to your betters,' Salvadore said. 'I ask a polite question. I expect a polite answer.'

'So get stuffed!' Toni snarled. 'How's about something to eat?'

Salvadore moved forward. His hand caught Toni's wrist in a grip of steel, his vast belly, rock hard, smashed into Toni's side, driving the breath out of him. His arm was twisted and he found himself gasping and on his knees. He felt a hard, sweaty hand slap him heavily around his ears, then dazed, he groped for his gun as Salvadore released him.

'Don't do it!'

The snap in Salvadore's voice made him turn and look up. He found himself looking into the menacing barrel of a .45.

'All right, my friend,' Salvadore said gently, 'so now you'll be polite. I may be fat and old, but I've eaten boys like you for breakfast. So now you ask politely for dinner.'

Toni got unsteadily to his feet.

Salvadore put his gun back into its holster, hidden under his thin coat.

'Look,' he said, and the gun appeared in his hand, then he chuckled. 'I was Lucky's best man. I'm still good. Okay, so I'm old, but I've never lost the sharpness,' and the gun disappeared. He patted Toni's shoulder. 'So you want something to eat, huh?'

'Yes, please, and thank you,' Toni said huskily. 'I guess I could eat something.'

Salvadore put his thick arm around Toni's shoulders.

'Come.' He led him into the kitchen. 'Always in my home there is good food.'

An hour later, Toni got into Salvadore's small fishing boat, awkwardly carrying a fishing rod and the field glasses. Salvadore had fitted him out in a dark blue shirt, a pair of Levis and a bush hat. He showed him how to start the outboard engine.

'Just put the rod in here,' he said pointing to a clip on the side of the boat. 'Don't get too close to the houseboat. If anyone comes up to you, there are many fishermen on the lake. Tell them you are my friend. They won't bother you.'

Toni steered the boat out into the middle of the lake, then cut the engine. He could see, in the distance, the houseboat. He clipped the rod into position, then focused the glasses on the houseboat.

He was startled at the power of the glasses.

The houseboat seemed to spring forward at him as he peered through the eyepieces. He could see the flaked paint, the holes in the deck and the rust on the rails. There was no one to be seen. He sat there, feeling the sun burning his back and settled himself to watch.

CHAPTER NINE

THE PREVIOUS EVENING just before Scott had gone to bed, Johnny had asked permission to borrow the 12-bore shotgun

'Thought I might take a walk in the woods and bag something for supper'

'Sure,' Scott said 'A good idea I never get time now for shooting You could find coot or pigeon'

So the following morning after a swim, Johnny took the gun with a pocketful of 6 shot cartridges and told Freda he would be back for lunch

'Don't get lost,' she warned him. 'Keep to the path and don't go far'

He spent the whole morning in the jungle and enjoyed himself He bagged four pigeons and two wild duck, and he felt ten feet tall as he walked into the kitchen where Freda was cooking steaks

'Quite the man around the home,' she said as he showed her the birds 'Suppose, this afternoon, you go on making yourself useful? I've asked Ed to put up four shelves over there If I've asked him once, I've asked him twenty times The wood's all cut How about it?'

'Sure,' Johnny said 'I'll fix it'

They had lunch, then went to bed together and around 15 00 Freda said she would go across to the village and collect the mail and the newspaper

'I'll fix the shelves'

It was because he spent the next two hours in the kitchen that Toni, sweltering in the sun, didn't catch a glimpse of him, but he did see Freda as she came on deck, got in the motor-boat and headed towards him

Hastily, Toni hid the field glasses and lifted the rod from its clip

Freda's boat passed him by a hundred feet and he was aware she looked at him He kept his head lowered and flicked the rod with what he hoped was a professional movement

Some chick! he thought Man! Could he use a piece of tail like her!

If it were really Johnny holed up in the houseboat, Toni thought, he certainly had it good But was it Johnny? He surveyed the houseboat once again with his glasses, but he saw no sign of life Hell! He was getting roasted alive out in this goddamn

sun and he was aware that there were no other fishermen on the lake. Maybe he had better go back. He could be attracting attention by sitting out in the boat like this. Again he searched the houseboat with his glasses, then still seeing nothing, he laid the rod down and decided to return. He would come out later when the sun was less fierce.

Unused to the sun, he was now getting painfully sun-burned. He moved over to the outboard engine, caught hold of the starting handle and yanked. There was a splutter and nothing else. Cursing, he yanked on the cord again. Again no results.

He glared at the engine and cursed it. Four more times he yanked at the starting cord with sweat streaming off him, but the engine wouldn't fire. He sat on the side of the boat, his shirt soaked with sweat.

Salvadore had told him he would have no trouble with the engine. All he had to do was to pull the cord. Now the bastard wouldn't start! He could get burned alive out here!

He had been crazy to have used the boat! He knew nothing about boats, or outboard engines. He couldn't even swim! He looked longingly at the cool water around him.

His gun harness was chafing his skin. He was wearing it under his shirt. He reached inside the shirt, undid the harness and took it off, laying the gun by the fishing rod.

What the hell was he to do?

He went back to the engine and dragged at the cord. The engine spluttered and died.

Then he heard the phut-phut of an approaching motorboat. Looking up, he saw Freda returning from Little Creek. He waved to her and she cut her engine, and steering her boat, came drifting up to him.

'Are you in trouble?' she asked.

Toni stared at her. His eyes took in the sweep of her breasts, the firm outline of her buttocks, her blonde hair and her brilliant blue eyes.

'Yeah. She won't start.'

'It's the heat. You're oiled up. Take the plug out and clean it. You'll start then.'

Toni looked around. 'I've got no tools.'

'I'll do it. You hold the boats together.'

She opened a locker and took out a tool kit, then slid into his boat. As she got in, her foot caught in the harness of his gun and she stumbled, rocking the boats. He caught hold of her, steadying her and the feel of her arm in his hand sent a sexual jolt through him. He kicked the gun and the harness out of sight under one of the seats.

She was kneeling, her back to him, and she opened the tool kit.

'You're new around here, aren't you?' she said as she got out a box spanner

'Yeah I'm a friend of Bruno' He eyed her back, feeling lust go through him

'I thought I hadn't seen you before' She got the plug out. 'See? Oil'

She turned, holding the plug

'Never thought of it,' Toni said huskily 'I don't know a thing about boats. just down here on vacation.'

'Salvadore is a good friend of mine.' She took a rag from the tool kit and cleaned the plug 'It's always nice to see a new face'

He eyed her, wondering what she meant 'I guess'

'You won't get any fish at this time,' she went on as she put the plug back and tightened it. 'In another two hours, but it's too hot now'

'You can say that again. I'm frying.'

'Are you staying with Salvadore?'

'That's right'

She looked at him her blue eyes inviting

'Maybe I'll see something of you'

Was she giving him the 'come on'? Toni wondered, and again she stabbed him like a sword thrust.

'Why not?' He peered at her. 'Bruno tells me you have your half-brother staying with you'

'He left early this morning He has business in Miami' She smiled 'I miss his company It's lonely for me My husband doesn't get back until late'

'Yeah I can imagine'

She got into her boat

'You try now. She'll start.' She reached for the starter on her engine 'If you've got nothing to do why not drop by around half-past five?' Her blue eyes met his 'My husband doesn't get back until seven'

Before he could reply, she started her engine, waved to him and sent the boat fast away from him

Toni stared after her, his heart thumping. If that wasn't an invitation for a lay, what was? And what a lay! But wait, he told himself, suppose Johnny or whoever this punk was hadn't gone? Suppose she was setting him up to walk into a trap? But why should she? He knew her type a chick with hot pants Maybe this guy hadn't been her half-brother. Maybe he wasn't Bianda. So he had gone and she had the itch again.

He pulled the starter and the engine fired With his mind seething with excitement, he headed back to Little Creek.

Salvadore was on the quay and he helped Toni tie up the boat 'Did you see him?'

'No, but I saw her The goddamn engine wouldn't start She fixed it She says her half-brother left this morning for Miami. She wants me to go over there at half-past five' Toni wiped his sweating face with the back of his hand 'What do you think?'

Salvadore shook his head

'If he's there you could walk into trouble'

'Yeah, but if he's there why should she ask me over?' He leered 'It's my bet whoever this punk is, he's gone and she wants it. So okay, I go over there, take a look around, slip her what she wants, then tell the boss it wasn't the guy and go back That makes sense, doesn't it?'

Salvadore looked at him for a long moment

'It's your funeral You could be right Anyway, why should I worry? You can take care of yourself If you want to go, then go'

'Yeah How's about a long, cold beer? I'm boiled'

Johnny was just putting the last of the shelves in place when he heard the distant sound of Freda's outboard motor. He tightened the final screw and then went to the kitchen window

He saw her boat coming fast and as he was about to step out on deck, he paused, seeing another boat far out on the lake His instinct for danger stopped him in his tracks He watched the other boat with a lone man in it, heading for Little Creek

Freda steered the boat under the kitchen window and called 'Don't come out!' The urgency in her voice told him there was trouble

He moved into the living-room and waited until she joined him. 'What is it?'

Quickly she told him of her encounter with Toni

'He has a gun and harness,' she concluded 'He says he's Salvadore's friend'

Johnny sat down. He had a feeling of being suffocated. The net was drawing in on him

'Tell me about him,' he said 'What's he look like?'

'Around thirty, thin, dark, good-looking He had a tattoo on his right arm a naked woman.'

Johnny flinched

Toni Capello! The tattoo fixed it!

Seeing his reaction, Freda said, 'Is he one of them?'

'Yes . . . he's one of them They've got close, baby'

They looked at each other and she came to him, kneeling by his side

'He asked about my half-brother I said you had gone.'

'I must go'

'No!' Her hand touched his face 'We can bluff him, Johnny

I told him to come and see me at five-thirty I think he'll come
You go out into the jungle and wait I can convince him you've
gone and then they'll look elsewhere, but from now on you stay
here and keep out of sight'

He stared at her. 'You asked him to come here?'

'Johnny! I love you! I want you to be safe! He'll come I'll
show him around, then I'll get rid of him Once he's sure you're
not here, he'll go away'

'You don't know what you're doing! This man's dangerous! I
know him! You can't have him here alone!'

'There's no man born I can't handle,' Freda said and smiled.
'I know men I can handle him You go into the jungle and wait.
I'll get rid of him before Ed gets back.'

Johnny stared at her Then into his mind he remembered
what Scott had said *We swim raw You don't have to bother
about Freda She's seen more naked men than I've seen shrimps.*
He had thought then that this had been a stupid remark from a
stupid man, but now he wondered if Scott could have been speak-
ing the truth

Did it matter? He looked at her Without her, he could shortly
be dead He felt a moment of sadness, then he shrugged

'I guess that's the best way to handle it Okay, I'll go into the
jungle, but watch him . . he's as tricky as a snake'

She was watching him 'Don't look like that, Johnny In another
four days, we'll be away from here I'm doing this only for you.'

'Yes' He moved away from her.

For me? he was thinking, or for the money?

'It was smart of me, wasn't it to tell him you had gone?'
He could see she was longing for a little praise, but he couldn't
give it. There was a pause, then she went on, 'But from now on
you must keep out of sight You must stay indoors, but it's only
for four days'

'That's right' He couldn't look at her He had never felt so
depressed 'Watch him I'll get moving'

'Kiss me'

Did he want to? He forced himself to look at her, then those
brilliant blue eyes hooked him. She came into his arms, her
fingers going through his hair, her body hard against his.

'Johnny . . Johnny I love you,' she said, her lips against
his cheek 'We'll soon be free of this Trust me! I'll handle him'

With his gun and vacuum flask of ice water, Johnny went
into the hot jungle and sitting in the shade, he settled to wait.
From where he sat he could see the lake and the houseboat

A few minutes after 17 30, he saw a motorboat coming across
the lake.

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Toni had been hitting the bottle and now he was full of whisky courage and lust. He had borrowed a coat from Salvadore so he could wear his gun harness and he had taken care to clean, oil and check the gun before leaving Little Creek.

He didn't expect trouble, but he was ready for it. His fear of Johnny was damped down by whisky and the thought of Freda.

As he neared the houseboat, he cut the engine and let the boat drift up as Freda came out on deck.

'Hi!' she said. 'I was hoping you'd come.' She caught the rope he tossed to her and made the boat fast. 'I bet you could use a drink?'

'Yeah.' Toni scrambled on deck. His hand went inside his coat and eased the gun for a quick draw. He looked around, very tense now.

'Well, come on in.' Freda turned and walked into the living-room.

Moving like a cat, keeping close to her so if there was trouble her body would shield him, Toni moved into the room. One quick glance told him they were alone.

'Let's take a look around, baby,' he said. 'I like to know we're strictly on our own.'

She laughed.

'You men! Johnny was the same. Scared my husband was hidden somewhere with a shotgun. Come on, then.'

Leading the way, she took him from her bedroom to the other two bedrooms, into the kitchen, into the shower room. She even opened a big closet for him to inspect.

Then turning, a jeering look in her bright blue eyes, she said, 'Satisfied?'

Toni grinned. He was now completely relaxed.

'Sure. let's have that drink.'

She led him back into the living-room.

'Sorry there's only coke. We can't afford liquor.'

Toni blew out his cheeks, but maybe a coke was better. He knew he was already loaded.

'Fine.' He sat down, eyeing her as she left him to go into the kitchen. She came back with a coke and handed it to him.

He leered at her, drank, then leered again.

'Some chick!'

'That's what Johnny was always saying.'

'Your half-brother?'

She laughed and sat down away from him.

'I've never had a brother . . . half or otherwise.' She winked at him. 'Strictly between ourselves, a girl has to be respectable in this dreary neck of the woods. Johnny was a stray my husband picked up, but he was good in bed.'

Toni became alert 'What's happened to him?'

She shrugged 'Ships that pass in the night'

'What the hell does that mean?'

'He stayed three nights He left early this morning He was a nice guy but funny in a way' She looked at him 'He was superstitious Are you superstitious?'

'Me? No'

'He was always talking about a St Christopher medal he had lost It seemed to prey on his mind'

Johnny! Toni leaned forward

'Where did you say he was going?'

'Miami He had money He said he was going to hire a boat and go to Havana Now, why should anyone want to go there?'

'Did he have any baggage with him?'

'A big suitcase It was heavy even he had trouble with it.' She cocked her head on one side 'Why the interest?'

Toni sat still, thinking This was important information He knew he should get back fast and telephone Luigi They might pick up this sonofabitch in Miami before he hired a boat. Then he looked at Freda Maybe an hour wouldn't make any difference

He stood up 'Let's you and me find out if one of those beds is soft,' he said

She laughed 'That's what you're here for, isn't it?'

Breathing fast, his unsteady fingers unbuckling his gun harness, Toni followed her into her bedroom

Sitting in the shade and cursing the mosquitoes that were buzzing around him, Johnny saw Toni come out on deck and get into the motorboat He looked at his strap watch Toni had been in there for an hour Johnny didn't need to exercise his imagination to know what those two had been doing He felt a cold bitterness towards her How could she tell him she loved him?

He waited until Toni's boat was out of sight, then he walked quickly across the jetty and into the living-room

He heard her in the kitchen He went to the door to find her making pastry In a casserole, the pigeon breasts were simmering.

'It's all right,' she said, seeing him in the doorway, and quickly she told him what she had said to Toni 'I sold it to him. I know he's convinced'

Johnny drew in a deep breath If Toni now convinced Massino of this story, then the heat would be off Massino would know that he (Johnny), once in Havana, would be out of his reach

'I told him you had a heavy suitcase with you,' Freda went on She paused while she rolled out the pastry 'That was smart, wasn't it, Johnny?'

But in spite of what she had done for him, in spite of her

cleverness, Johnny could only think of the hour she had spent with Toni alone.

'Did you enjoy his company?' he asked, his tone bitter

She looked at him, her eyes suddenly stony.

'Is that all you have to say . . . no thanks?'

He moved uneasily 'I'm asking you . . . did you enjoy his company? You got laid, didn't you?'

She began to line a pie-dish with the pastry. He stood there, waiting. He watched her tip the contents of the casserole into the pie-dish. 'Didn't you?'

'That's right.'

He wanted to hit her but he controlled the urge.

'You're nothing but a whore, aren't you?'

She covered the pie-dish with pastry, then she put the dish into the oven.

'Aren't you?'

'Yes.' She turned and faced him. 'Before I married Ed I was a busy, busy call girl. He knew it and now you know it.' Without looking at him again, she washed her hands under the tap, dried them, and moving past him, she went into the living-room. He hesitated, then followed her, feeling ashamed and defeated.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Thank you for what you've done for me. Forget what I said.'

She sat down.

'That man meant no more to me than dozens of other men who have paid for it.' She looked directly at him. 'While he was getting rid of his dirty lust, I was thinking of you. You're the only one, Johnny, who has ever turned me on.' She shrugged. 'Can't you see, if you can get this stupid jealousy out of your mind, that I had to do it? I had to have him here to convince him you had gone and to convince him you're heading for Havana. If I had held back, he wouldn't have believed me. Can't you see that? Now, you're safe.'

Johnny went to her and put his arms around her.

'I'm sorry, baby. You mean so much to me. I'm sorry.'

'Forget it.' She kissed him, then she got to her feet and went to the window to stare across the lake. 'So what are we going to do now? You mustn't show yourself. Can't we go tomorrow. . . can't we get away?'

'Not yet. Although it's safer, baby, the way you've fixed it, it's also a lot more complicated.'

'How do you mean?'

'If we took off tomorrow Ed would ask questions. He'd talk to Salvatore who would then know you lied to Toni. Then he'd start a hunt, not only for me, but for you. We have to wait at least another four days.'

She lifted her hands in despair.

'Wait . that's all I do wait!'

Then they heard the sound of the truck approaching and she went into the kitchen

Massino was looking at the weekly Numbers figures that Andy had given him when Toni came on the line, calling from Little Creek

Massino looked at Andy

'It's Toni Get on the extension and write down what he says!'
Then to Toni, he barked 'Did you find him?'

'No, Mr Joe I missed him by six hours He was here, but he's gone now The chick says he's headed for Miami to hire a boat for Havana'

'Havana?' Massino's voice shot up

'Yeah'

'Well, come on, come on! Give me the details!'

Toni told him all he knew He was careful not to give details of his visit to Freda He said she gave him a description of Johnny, mentioned the medal, said he had been holed up there for three nights and had gone off, carrying a heavy suitcase

'So what do you want me to do, Mr Joe?'

Massino's mind raced 'I'll call you back Stick around,' and taking Salvatore's number, he hung up

'If he's got to Havana we're bitched!' he said, glaring at Andy
'And he's got the money!'

'So she says,' Andy said quietly.

Massino stiffened 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I think we should check her story out, Mr Joe,' Andy said
'You're right, if he's heading for Havana and Luigi doesn't pick him up before he leaves Miami then we kiss him and the money good-bye, but this could be a bluff Toni's got nothing between his ears He'd fall for any story a woman fed him. Let's check the woman first'

Massino thought about this, then nodded

'I'll talk to Luigi Got his number?'

'I'll get it.' Andy went into his office and returned a few minutes later 'He's on the line now'

Massino snatched up the receiver.

'Luigi? How are you? Long time no see What's that? Yeah sure is a big steal Yeah Listen How about a little help? This woman . . .' He looked across at Andy who said, 'Freda Scott, Little Creek.' 'Yeah . Freda Scott, lives at Little Creek. Salvatore knows all about her. She says Bianda took off early this morning, heading for Miami and then Havana She could be lying I want you to send someone out there and talk to her

and when I say talk I mean give her the goddamn works I want her squeezed dry! Don't let up until you're sure she's telling the truth . get it? If you have to knock her off, knock her off. Will you do this for me, Luigi?

'Sure, Joe' Luigi sounded expansive 'I've got a couple of bums who'd take real pleasure in a job like that, but it'll cost How's about a grand guaranteed results?'

'Come on, Luigi you're my friend. You wouldn't rob me, would you?'

'No more than you'd rob me, Joe A grand and a guarantee'

'Suppose she's telling the truth?'

'Well, then you'll know, won't you?'

Massino cursed 'Okay Just get moving!' and he hung up

At the other end of the line, Luigi knocked ash off his cigar and grinned to himself He liked nothing better than easy money and this money couldn't be easier The time was 21.15. No point in rushing this Besides, he had to supervise his restaurant He called Salvatore and told him to send Toni back to the Waterfront Bar.

When Toni entered Luigi's office, he found two men propping up the wall while Luigi, at his desk, cigar gripped between his teeth, was checking the restaurant's booking

The two men startled Toni He was used to tough types but these two seemed to him to have escaped from a zoo. The bigger of the two had the broken face of a boxer, massively built and with a moronic grin, little beady eyes and no ears They had probably been bitten off in some past brawl, Toni decided The other was younger, thin, blond with expressionless eyes and a thin mouth and the deadpan expression of a pot smoker

'Come on in,' Luigi said 'The big one's Bernie The other's Clive They're going to talk to your chick Mr Joe gets the idea she's lying so I'm sending the boys to shake the crap out of her' Luigi looked at Toni and grinned 'How was she as a lay?'

'Okay, Mr Luigi'

'Fine You're lucky She won't be much after these two have worked her over Just wise up When's the best time for a visit?'

'Her husband leaves at five-thirty in the morning She's on her own then,' Toni said uneasily

Luigi looked at the two propping up the wall

'Suppose you get over there around six? Don't worry about interrupting her coffee Mr Joe's anxious for news, and don't worry about her It's a big lake'

The two nodded and went away leaving Toni standing, uneasy and staring at Luigi Even he, tough as he was, hated the thought of a chick like Freda in the hands of those two apes

'Okay, Toni,' Luigi said, 'go and enjoy yourself Everything's

on the house If you want a girl tell the barman He'll fix you
Have a ball'

Toni went to the bar and got drunk

The sound of the truck starting up woke Johnny He looked out of the window There was mist on the lake and he could see the red rim of the sun coming up behind the pines. He looked at his watch The time was 05 30 He reached for a cigarette and listened to the truck backing out of the parking bay, then go roaring up the dirt road

The evening had passed with the help of the television Freda's pigeon pie had been a success. Scott had congratulated him on his shooting Johnny had slept badly, continually waking, dozing, then waking again Now, a cigarette between his lips, he took stock of his position

If Massino was convinced by Freda's story, the heat must cool But would he be convinced? He (Johnny) would have to stay under cover for at least another four days, then he would have to get to a telephone and call Sammy. He wouldn't dare show himself in Little Creek Where else was a telephone? He would have to ask Freda that. If Sammy could assure him the heat was off, then he and Freda would go back to East City, take a chance, collect the money and get out of town If Massino was sure he was in Havana, he could see no danger in again driving south. Problems! First getting to a telephone and then getting a car There was no question now of Freda hiring a car from Little Creek Maybe they would have to walk to New Symara . . . some walk in this heat!

He threw off the sheet and got out of bed A cup of coffee would go well with his cigarette

'Johnny?'

Freda came out of her bedroom Her blonde hair was mussed, but to Johnny, with the softness of sleep still on her, she looked beautiful

'Just getting coffee, baby Want some?'

'Hmmm' She went into the bathroom

As Johnny poured coffee into a saucepan, he thought about her A whore! So what? Lots of women were whores, trading their bodies not for money but for presents, jewels, furs . . . whatever they yearned for She was his woman, he told himself. Who cares about anyone's past if there is love and Johnny knew he was in love with her He wasn't much anyway, but he would be! \$186,000 made any man something!

He could feel it was going to be hot and he thought with dismay that from now on there would be no swimming, no fishing He would have to stay out of sight

He poured the hot coffee into a cup and as he was about to pour more coffee into a second cup, he heard a car drive up.

Moving swiftly, he put the second cup away, then darted into his bedroom, snatched up his gun, pulled the sheet up over the bed, then darted into Scott's bedroom, the window of which gave a view on to the jetty.

He saw a dusty Lincoln parked at the foot of the jetty and from it spilled two men—one big, like an ape, the other small, white-faced with staring eyes. They both wore black suits, white shirts and white ties. They stood looking around, then they started across the jetty, taking their time as Johnny moved into the passage.

Freda, still in her shortie nightdress, was standing in the bathroom door.

'Trouble,' Johnny said softly. 'Don't worry I'll take care of it.'

'No! Get out of sight!' Freda whispered fiercely. 'I'll take care of it! Get in the closet and wait!'

She caught hold of his arm and shoved him towards the big closet.

For a moment he hesitated, then when a knock sounded on the door, he slid into the closet and shut the door.

Freda ran into her bedroom, snatched up a wrap and struggled into it as the knock came again.

She braced herself, then went to the door and opened it. When she saw Bernie and Clive, she felt a rush of cold blood up her spine. But she kept control of herself.

'What do you want?'

Bernie, smelling of sweat, his moronic grin terrifying, moved forward, forcing her back.

'You, dolly-bird. We want to talk to you about Johnny.'

But it was the other one Freda feared—the little, white-faced horror with his evil, sadistic eyes who followed behind the ape man.

'He's gone,' she said.

They were now in the living-room and she had retreated to the far wall.

'Tell us about him, dolly-bird. We're looking for him,' Bernie said.

'He left yesterday.'

'That's what we heard.' Bernie shuffled forward and snatched off her wrap leaving her in her shortie nightdress. 'Yeah, we heard that,' then he slapped her across her face so violently she bounced back against the wall and then sprawled on the floor. He reached down and tore off her nightdress, 'but we don't believe it, dolly-bird. Feed us another story.'

She lay naked at his feet, staring up at him.

'He went to Miami yesterday morning early,' she said, her voice steady 'Get out of here, you apes!'

Bernie sniggered

'Go ahead, Clive, work on her,' he said 'When you're tired, I'll take over'

In the closet, Johnny listened He quietly opened the closet door, gun in hand and moved into the passage He was wearing only pyjama trousers, his feet were bare and he made no sound as he entered the living-room

Clive had caught hold of Freda and had hauled her to her feet He was setting himself to slap her as Johnny killed him

The bang of the gun made Freda scream She hid her face in her hands and dropped to her knees

Clive, shot through the back of his head, heaved forward and fell

Snarling, Bernie, groping for his gun, spun around to face Johnny who shot him through the face The big man crashed down on top of Clive, his right arm catching Freda on the back of her neck as he fell She sprawled on her face, then twisted and half sat up, staring at the two dead men, her eyes wide with horror, her mouth open in a soundless scream

Dropping his gun, Johnny went to her, got her to her feet and half carried her, half dragged her into her bedroom He laid her gently on the bed

'Stay here Don't think about a thing'

He ran into his room and struggled into his shirt and trousers He slid his feet into his shoes, then he returned to the living-room

Freda lay still, her eyes closed She struggled with hard, dry, choking sobs It seemed to her she lay there for a long time She couldn't move The horror of seeing the two men shot dead paralysed her

The sun was climbing and it came through the open window hurting her eyes She put her arm across her face, moaning She lay there, not caring, wanting only to believe this was a horrible nightmare

Then a hand touched her gently

'Let's go, baby,' Johnny said 'Come on This is where we duck out'

She opened her eyes and stared up at him

'Go where?'

'We have their car It's our chance We've got to go!'

He hauled her off the bed and she leaned against him

'What's happened those men?'

'Forget them. They're in the lake Get dressed We've got to hurry . . every minute is important'

She stood in a daze, staring at him

'Come on, baby!' His voice sharpened. 'Get dressed! You've got to pack! Hurry!'

'You killed them! I can't go with you! You killed them!'

'You can't not go with me,' Johnny said 'Get dressed!'

Those words made an impact. She shuddered, then making an effort, she opened her closet and took from it the man's shirt and the stretch pants. Her closet was pathetically bare—a cheap cotton dress, a pair of worn Levis, a pair of broken-down shoes.

She pulled on her panties and the stretch pants

'You want to take any of this other junk?'

'No.'

'Come on.' He waited until she had put on the shirt and run a comb through her hair, then he led her into the living-room. 'You've got to write a letter to Ed. Got any writing paper?'

Shaking, she sat at the table. 'In that drawer.'

He found a block of cheap notepaper and an envelope. He found a biro.

'Write this. Dear Ed, I'm sick of it here. I'm going with Johnny. We love each other, Freda.'

Somehow she wrote the note, her hand shaking. Johnny put it in the envelope and laid it on the table.

'Let's go!'

He picked up his suitcase and, taking her by her arm, he hurried her across the jetty to the Lincoln.

As he started the motor, he looked at his strap watch. The time was 06 40. At best, he thought, they had a three-hour start before Luigi would begin to wonder where the two apes had got to. Then he would investigate, phone, and the organization would swing into action.

In a car like this you could go some way in three hours.

Driving steadily, with Freda still in shock at his side, he headed for the freeway.

CHAPTER TEN

THEY HAD BEEN DRIVING for over an hour in silence. Johnny kept the car moving but he was careful to keep just under the speed limit. He knew it would be a disaster for both of them if they were stopped by a speed cop. He longed to let the powerful car out and put more mileage behind him, but he restrained himself.

He by-passed Daytona Beach, anxious not to get snarled up in any heavy traffic, and kept on up Highway 1, heading north. As

he drove, his mind was active. From time to time, he glanced at Freda who was staring through the windshield, her face white, her eyes blank. He could see the shock was still hitting her. Well, now they were out in the open, he thought, and in a stolen car. He was safe enough for another two hours, then he would have to get rid of the car.

All kinds of problems crowded in on him, but he refused to be panicked. They now knew he was wearing a beard so that had to come off. They knew he wore khaki drill. He would have to change his clothes. Salvatore would give them a description of Freda. He looked at her blonde, silky hair. That was like a beacon to anyone hunting for them. That would have to be fixed.

Suddenly she said, 'Where are we going?'

He drew in a deep breath of relief.

'How are you feeling, baby?'

'I'm all right.' Her voice was shaky. 'Where are we going?'

'We're driving north. We have another two hours before they start wondering. In two hours we'll be at St David's Bay. We'll stop there. It's a vacation town, packed with tourists and cars. We'll have to get rid of this car. Don't worry. Take it easy. Leave it to me.'

'Oh, Johnny, I'm frightened!' She put her hand on his thigh. 'Did you have to kill them?'

'I warned you, baby, this is the Mafia. You kill or get killed,' Johnny said quietly. 'I still think we have a chance. I'll tell you now: there's \$186,000 in those bags. I'm telling you because you are now in this mess as much as I am. I'm sorry, but you are and you've got to realize it. There's still a good chance we can get the money and get away with it.'

'A hundred and eighty-six thousand!' Her voice shot up. 'But, Johnny, that's a fortune!'

'That's it. Well, you know now. It's a gamble: our lives against that money. If I get it, we'll share it. I mean that.'

'So what do we do?'

'When we get to St David's Bay, go to a hairdresser and get them to tint your hair any colour you like, but the word will have gone out to look for a blonde. I'll get this beard off. We've got to buy clothes. I've got the money. You don't have to worry about that. Then we've got to ditch this car. We'll take a Greyhound bus to Brunswick. There we'll hole up and wait. We have enough money. We can wait two months if we have to. Then when my contact in East City tells me the heat is off, we go collect the money.'

'Do you think we'll get it?'

'If we don't, we're dead,' he said, knowing this was the truth.

It was 09.50 when they drove into St David's Bay. Johnny saw

a vast free car park by the beach crammed with cars and caravans 'This is where we ditch the car' He drove into the car park It took him several minutes to find a space, but he found one 'From now on we walk'

He unlocked his suitcase and took out what was left of Sammy's money

'This is how much we have got,' he said and counted the money while she watched him 'Two thousand, eight hundred and fifty-seven dollars I want you to see this, baby I want you to know that from now on we are together, partners' He counted out a thousand and handed her the bills 'You have this, just in case something happens to me Go find a hairdresser and get your hair fixed, then buy clothes Don't spend much We could have to live on this for some time Be careful what you buy nothing that'll catch the eye We'll be husband and wife I've been thinking We two are on vacation, travelling Greyhound and seeing the country I'm giving you the background We take a room in some little hotel in Brunswick You tell them I've a bad heart and I have to take it easy We won't go out much You think it was a mistake for us to come so far I'm in need of a rest We sign in as Mr and Mrs Henry Jackson from Pittsburgh This is only rough thinking. We'll polish it later.'

She put the money he had given her in her bag, then she looked at him 'While I'm getting my hair fixed, Johnny, do you plan to leave me?'

This shocked him For a long moment, he stared at her, then smiled 'Ask yourself It's only in oneself that one knows trust, baby'

Closing the suitcase, he got out of the car

She joined him

'I'm sorry' She touched his arm 'I've known so many men I'm so sick of myself! I don't know who to trust'

'If you can't trust me by now, baby,' he said gently, 'then you're in real trouble Come on, let's go'

They walked into the town Although it was early, the tourists were out in force, heading for the beach Half-way down the Main street, Johnny spotted the Greyhound bus station

'We meet there' He pointed 'Be as quick as you can I'll wait for you . . . you wait for me Okay?'

She hated him leaving her.

'Johnny . . . I'm scared to be on my own . . . really scared'

He smiled at her

'But, baby, we're always alone I've been alone all my life and so have you Just get your hair fixed and buy some clothes You'd better buy a hold-all' He looked around. 'Up there on the left a ladies' hairdressers Get your hair fixed first.'

'Yes' She forced a smile 'See you, Johnny'

'That's one thing you can be sure of'

They parted and Johnny went in search of a barber

Luigi was occupied with his maitre d'hôtel, arranging the menu for the following day when his telephone bell rang. The time was 11.05. He reached for the receiver as he said, 'Give 'em duck. We've got too many ducks in the freezer.' Then into the mouthpiece, he said, 'Who is it?'

'This is Joe!' Massino's voice was tight with rage. 'What's happening? I've been waiting! What did that whore say?'

Luigi stiffened. He had been so occupied with the routine work of his restaurant, he had completely forgotten he had sent Bernie and Clive out to Little Creek.

'Still waiting, Joe. I should hear any minute. The moment I hear I'll call you back.'

'What the hell are those punks doing?' Massino bawled. 'Get me some action!' and he hung up.

Luigi was now worried. He had told those two to see the girl at 06.00. Five hours ago! He snatched up the receiver. 'Get Capello here!' he barked, cut the connection, then dialled Salvatore's number. 'What's going on?' he demanded. 'Bernie and Clive were supposed to see this whore at six this morning. What's happening?'

'I don't know,' Salvatore said. 'I haven't seen them. Hold for a moment.' After a minute or so, he came back on the line. 'Just looked at the houseboat through my glasses. No sign of life.'

'I'm sending Capello. Go with him and find out what's happening.' Luigi's voice was now a snarl. 'Call me back pronto.'

An hour later, as Little Creek's church clock was striking twelve, Toni arrived at the store in a car Luigi had lent him. Salvatore was waiting for him.

'What gives?' Salvatore asked.

'I don't know. We've got to get over there and find out.'

They climbed into Salvatore's boat and headed across the lake to the houseboat. Toni was first on deck, gun in hand. He was sweating and he had a hell of a headache from his heavy drinking the previous evening. Salvatore tied up and joined him. They went through the deserted houseboat, then Toni saw an envelope lying on the table. He opened it and read the message.

'Hey! Look at this! That bastard was here all the time! They've gone off together!'

'But where's Bernie and Clive?' Salvatore looked around, then knelt, putting his hand on the worn carpet. 'Been recently washed.' The two men looked at each other, then Salvatore went out on deck, staring into the clear water on the lake. Toni joined him.

'You think he knocked them off?'

'Watch it!' The snap in his voice stiffened her 'Later I've got the tickets It held me up Come on, let's go'

She was so relieved he hadn't deserted her, she wanted to cry, but she controlled herself She followed him to the bus and they climbed in

Johnny regarded her as they sat at the back of the bus, nodding his approval She too had changed her appearance She was now a red-head and it suited her She was wearing a dark-green trouser suit and big sun goggles He eyed every passenger who boarded the bus, but he saw no one to alert an alarm

It wasn't until the bus began to roar along the freeway that he put his hand on hers

'You look really great, baby,' he said, 'but I still like you better blonde You got everything you want?'

'Yes I spent over a hundred dollars, Johnny'

'Okay, okay,' he said and again pressed her hand.

'Oh, Johnny, I was scared . I began to wonder '

'We're both scared, but it could work out It's worth a try, isn't it?'

She thought of all that money \$186,000!

'Yes'

They sat in silence for some minutes, then Johnny said, 'Look, baby, I want you to know your position I know this is a bit late in the day, but I have it on my mind. There's still time for you to opt out at least I think so Maybe we've left it too late, but maybe, you still have a chance of opting out'

She stared at him, her eyes widening

'I don't know what you're saying'

'I keep thinking about it,' Johnny said 'I keep asking myself if I should drag you into this Sooner or later they will catch up with me When the Mafia sign goes up, you're as good as dead I mean this, but with luck, if I get the money, if I can buy my boat I'll settle for twelve months. I could be more than lucky and it might be three years but no more Who goes with me also gets the sign They may not bother with you right now, but if they find out we are together when they catch up with me . and they will eventually . then it'll be the end of your days as it will be the end of mine.'

She shivered

'I don't want to hear this, Johnny. Please

'You've got to hear it There's a chance We could survive three years We'd be beating the odds if we survive longer, but sooner or later, they'll get me and, baby, please think about what I'm saying. Don't imagine if they get me they'll forget you. They don't work like that They'll come after you. You could hide, but sooner or later there'll come a knock on your door and

it'll be them I want you with me, but I want you to realize the risk. Think about it We stand a chance, but not for long If I get the money, I'll fix it you get a big cut This I promise you so you don't have to worry about losing out In half an hour we'll get to Jacksonville You could get off there and get lost They could forget about you while hunting for me You have some money now You know how to take care of yourself I hate to say it, but I feel it in my bones for your safety you should get off at Jacksonville'

She closed her eyes, feeling the jogging motion of the bus and she tried to think, but nothing came into her mind except that immense sum of money \$186,000'

Three years of life?

With all that money she could have a ball of a time!

So suppose they caught up with them as Johnny seemed to think they would? So suppose they walked in and shot them to death as Johnny had shot those two apes to death?

What was death anyway? She tried to believe it as an escape But three years with \$186,000 . that would be living!

She sat there, her eyes closed and reviewed her own life What a stinking, hell of a life! Her dreary home, her dreary parents, the gruesome men in and out of her life, Ed and the boredom!

But at the back of her mind was the fear of the moment when a knock could come on the door She forced the fear away and opened her eyes Somehow she managed to smile.

'You and me, Johnny, together I don't opt out.'

The bus roared north and they sat, hand in hand, silent now, but both knowing whatever the future, they could now trust each other

Sammy the Black rolled out of bed around 0730 Feeling depressed and half asleep, he went into the shower room Fifteen minutes later he emerged, shaved and showered and started the coffee percolator

He had a number of reasons for feeling depressed, but the main reason which had kept him awake half the night was that Cloe had got herself pregnant again How the hell this could have happened defeated Sammy She swore she was on the pill, and now she was yelling for a quick abortion . and that cost! They had had a distressing meeting last night She demanded \$300!

'I'm not having any of your bastards!' she had shrieked. 'Come on . . . give me the money!'

But he had no money. Johnny had taken all his savings. He didn't tell her this, but he did say he had no \$300.

She had stared at him, her big, black eyes glittering

'Okay, if you haven't the bread, I'll look elsewhere Jacko wants me and he'll pay'

Sammy had regarded her lush, tall, with a body like a goddess, and his heart quailed. He couldn't lose her! He knew Jacko: a big, black buck who was always on the fringe of her life, waiting

'Give me a little time, honey,' he pleaded 'I'll get the money somehow'

'I'll give you six days no more!'

That was one problem then his goddamn brother was again in trouble. Sammy's mother had come to him. Only a matter of \$150 'You can't let your brother go to jail!'

Sammy had promised to do something but what?

Then his job as Mr Joe's chauffeur. Driving a Rolls had sounded fine. The grey uniform with its black piping had made Sammy proud and happy, but he quickly learned this was a job without a song. He was on constant call. After he had driven Mr Joe to his office, he had to rush back up town to take Mrs Joe shopping and, man! was she a bitch! She always seemed to want to go to some shop where parking was impossible and he had to circle and circle, getting snarled up in the traffic, and if he kept her waiting did she curse him and could she curse! Sammy thought wistfully of those days when he had collected the Numbers money with Johnny. He had been scared, but being scared was better than this rat-race. Then in the evening Mr and Mrs Joe went to nightclubs and he had to sit in the car until after 02 00 waiting for them. He had to keep the car immaculate or Mrs Joe would curse him. What a mug he had been to take this job!

Wearily, he got into his uniform. He had to pick up Mr Joe at nine. It took him a good half hour to drive up town against the traffic. As he was sipping his coffee, his telephone bell rang. He winced. This could be Cloe, screaming at him again. He hesitated, then lifted the receiver as if it were a ticking bomb.

'Sammy?'

A rush of cold blood went down his spine and he began to shake. This was too much!

Johnny!

'Yeah this is me,' Sammy said huskily.

'Listen, Sammy, I want you to go to the Greyhound bus station and take a look around. I want to know if it's still staked out.'

'Mr Johnny I can't! I've got enough troubles. You took my money. Cloe is in trouble again. My brother is in trouble again. Everyone is yelling me!' Sammy was close to tears. 'Please leave me alone.'

'This is important, Sammy!' Johnny's voice was hard. 'You've got to do it! You do it and I promise you I'll give you back your money plus another three thousand dollars. I promise you!'

Sammy stiffened 'You really mean that, Mr Johnny?'

'Have I ever let you down? You check the bus station and if it's clear, you'll get six thousand . that's a promise'

Sammy hesitated

'But suppose it ain't clear?'

'Then you keep checking and as soon as it's clear, you'll get the money'

Again Sammy hesitated Six thousand dollars! Cloe would get her abortion! His goddamn brother would be in the clear and he'd have money back in his steel box!'

'Okay, Mr Johnny, I'll do it'

'I'll call you this time tomorrow,' and Johnny hung up

Sammy was shaking with fear, but if he could get hold of six thousand dollars all his troubles would be over! And when Mr Johnny made a promise, it was a promise

Putting on his peak cap, he left his apartment and walked fast to the garage Why was Mr Johnny so anxious to know if the bus station was being watched? Sammy cringed It could mean only one thing, but he refused to let his mind dwell on it

He drove Massino to his office.

'Get home pronto,' Massino said 'Mrs Massino has shopping to do We'll be going out tonight She'll tell you about it' He paused to look at Sammy, seeing his grey complexion and the sweat glistening on his face 'What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing, boss,' Sammy said, cringing 'I'm fine, boss.'

Massino grunted, then strode across the sidewalk into his office building

Sammy looked across at the Greyhound station, then after a long hesitation, he got out of the Rolls

As Massino entered his office, he found Andy standing at the window

'Let's get at it,' Massino barked 'Have you got . ?' He stopped as Andy raised his hand, then beckoned to him Frowning, Massino joined him at the window He saw Sammy crossing the street, look furtively right and left, hesitate, then enter the bus station.

'What's that big bastard doing?' Massino growled 'I told him to get back right away to my wife.'

'Watch it,' Andy said quietly

There was a long delay, then Sammy came out of the bus station, again looked furtively to right and left, then he crossed the street, got in the Rolls and drove away

'So what?' Massino demanded.

He could see by Andy's expression that he had just seen something he didn't understand but Andy did

'He looked like a dip, didn't he?' Andy said 'He was scared'

'That's right I asked him what was the matter. He was sweating like a pig so what?'

Andy sat down by Massino's desk

'All along I've thought Bianda wasn't working alone I was sure someone helped him steal the money I thought it was Fuselli I never thought of Sammy'

Massino grew still, his eyes glittering

'Bianda has worked with Sammy for years,' Andy went on. 'When you start to think about it, it sticks out like a boil It's my bet Sammy is in contact with Bianda The money's over there, Mr Joe, in one of those lockers and Sammy is checking to see if we're still covering the lockers That's my reading Bianda had to have someone to work with . it's my bet Sammy rushed the two bags over to the locker while Bianda rushed back to establish his alibi'

Massino sat down, his face congested with rage

'Get Ernie and Toni to pick up that sonofabitch and bring him here I'll talk to him! I'll smash him to pulp!'

'No,' Andy said quietly 'We want Bianda and the money. So we set a trap This afternoon, you and me will take a drive uptown and with Sammy listening you'll tell me you've heard from Luigi that Bianda is now in Havana and you've kissed the money good-bye We then call off the boys watching the lockers so when Sammy checks again he finds the coast clear. He'll tell Bianda and he'll come back' Andy stared at Massino 'All we need is Toni sitting up here with a target rifle and a silencer.'

'I want that bastard alive'

'It's better to have him dead and the money back, isn't it?'

Massino thought about this

'Maybe'

'More than maybe, Mr Joe We don't have to pay the Big Man. We handle this ourselves It'll save us a lot of money.' Massino showed his teeth in a savage grin.

'Now you're using your head' He patted Andy's arm 'At least I can take care of that big bastard' He brooded for a moment, his face savage 'And the whore'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE GREYHOUND BUS had dropped them at the Brunswick bus station Johnny had gone to the information desk and asked the girl for a decent, cheap hotel

She was a pretty little thing with blonde curls and long false eyelashes and she was helpful.

'You could call me biased,' she said, 'but my uncle runs the Welcome hotel. It's thirty dollars a day, everything included and the food's wonderful. That's for the two of you.' She fluttered her eyelashes first at Freda, then at him. 'Honest, you'll be happy there.'

'Okay and thanks,' Johnny said. 'Where do I find it?'

'Third on the left up Main Street. It's not far.'

Carrying their bags and with Freda at his side, Johnny walked up Main Street. He was a little worried about the price. He had no idea how long they would have to stay at the hotel.

But when they were shown into the big room, with a double bed, two comfortable arm chairs, a shower room and a colour TV set, Johnny ceased to worry.

They both took showers, then got on the bed.

They had spent the rest of the afternoon in each other's arms. Around 19.30, they went down to the restaurant and enjoyed a good meal.

Johnny was pleased to see Freda was much more relaxed and even gay. They watched TV until midnight, then went to bed. Neither of them spoke of the Mafia nor of the money, consciously enjoying this comfort, and desperately clinging to what they both knew was an interval free of danger.

The following morning, Johnny called Sammy. Freda, sitting up in bed, listened. When he hung up, they looked at each other.

'We'll know this time tomorrow,' Johnny said.

'Do you think it'll be all right?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.' He got back on the bed. 'Baby, I want my boat. Do you mind?'

'Of course not. I want it too.' She put her hand on his. 'I want it for you because I love you.'

Later, as he was dozing off, she said, 'They'll never find us, will they?'

What was the use after warning her in telling her they could never escape? What was the use of telling her they were buying time? But he couldn't lie to her. In silence, he turned his hand to grip hers.

He felt her shiver and he knew she had got the message.

'Love me,' she said, pulling him on to her. 'Make me forget.'

The day drifted by. They went down to the restaurant for lunch. They returned to their room and watched a ball game on TV. They went down to the restaurant for dinner, then returned to their room. They watched TV until after midnight.

Johnny didn't sleep much. He kept thinking of Massino. He was aware that Freda was having nightmares. Twice, she cried out, but by putting his hand on hers, he stilled her cries.

Soon after 07.30, he called Sammy.

'What's happening?'

'I got news,' Sammy said, his voice excited. 'Mr Joe is sure you're in Havana. He said he's kissed you good-bye.'

Johnny's heart gave a little jump.

'How do you know that?'

'I had to drive Mr Joe and Mr Andy up town. Mr Joe was in a terrible mood cursing and swearing. He told Mr Andy this Mr Luigi had telephoned. This gentleman said you were now in Havana and there was nothing more he could do. He said the money was gone.' A pause, then Sammy asked, 'You're not in Havana, are you, Mr Johnny?'

'Never mind where I am. Look, Sammy, check the bus station. I must know if the boys are still there. Will you do that?'

'Yeah, I'll do it.'

'I'll call you back. When can I get you?'

'It's my night off. I'll be right here at five.'

'I'll call you just after five.'

'And, Mr Johnny, you still mean it about the six thousand bucks? I'm worrying about it. Cloe's giving me no peace.'

'You'll get it. I told you. It's a promise.'

When he had hung up, he told Freda what Sammy had said. They looked at each other.

'You know something, baby?' Johnny said, smiling at her. 'I think you've saved us. It was your brainwave to have told them I was heading for Havana. I'd never have thought of it. This could be our break. If the locker isn't guarded and I'll know this evening, then we can get the money.'

'Oh, God, Johnny! I prayed last night! I haven't prayed for years. So what do we do?'

'If we get the green light this evening, we hire a car and drive back to East City. We can do it in three hours. We'll arrive at the bus station around eleven o'clock. That's a good time. Not many people around and it will be dark. We get the money and we get out.'

'I can't believe it!'

'It depends if the bus station is being watched. If it isn't, then we go.'

'And Johnny, if they think we're in Havana.' She paused to look at him. 'Then no one will come knocking on our door.'

'That's it, baby.' He pulled her close to him. 'No one will come knocking on our door.'

As Sammy came out of the elevator, heading for Massino's office, Andy appeared. He stared at Sammy's grey, sweating face. 'Where do you think you're going?'

Sammy ducked his head in a servile bow.

'Just going to ask the boss if there was anything else for me to do. It's my night off, but I just wanted to ask him.'

Andy was sure Massino wouldn't be able to control himself if he saw Sammy. Andy had tapped Sammy's telephone and the conversation between Sammy and Johnny was on tape and Massino had listened to it.

'It's okay,' he said. 'You push off. Mr Joe's busy right now.'

Sammy nodded and got back into the elevator. Andy crossed to Massino's office, entered and closed the door.

Massino was at his desk. Leaning against the walls were Toni, Ernie, Lu Berilli and Benno. On Massino's desk lay a 22 target rifle equipped with powerful telescopic sight and a silencer.

'Sammy's going home,' Andy said and went to the window. 'Toni, get the rifle and come here.'

Puzzled, Toni looked at Massino who nodded. Toni picked up the rifle and followed Andy to the open window. Andy pulled up a straight-backed chair.

'Sit down. Look across the street. Look at the entrance to the bus station.'

Toni did as he was told.

'Now look through the telescopic sight,' Andy went on. 'Focus on anyone.'

Looking through the powerful sight, Toni was startled. A taxi driver, lolling against his cab and enjoying the sunshine, came into focus and Toni felt he could reach out and touch his head.

'Man!' he muttered. 'Some sight!'

'Keep watching. You'll see Sammy in a moment. I want you to get him in focus.'

Massino shoved back his chair and joined them at the window. They watched Sammy cross the street and pause to look around. His movements were furtive.

'Got him?'

'Sure. I can see the sweat on his mug,' Toni said.

They watched Sammy edge into the bus station and disappear. They waited. After a few minutes, Sammy came out, again looked furtively around and then walked away.

'Could you have killed him?' Andy asked as Toni lowered the rifle.

'With this beauty? Sure! A kid of six could have knocked him off.'

Andy looked at Massino.

'Maybe I'd better handle this, Mr Joe. Maybe it would be better if you were out of town.'

Massino thought, then nodded. 'Yeah.'

Looking at the other men, Andy said, 'So let's get this operation set up. Sooner or later, Bianda will show.' He turned to Toni.

'You and me are going to sit at this window until he shows. When he does, you blow his head off'

Toni drew in a sigh of relief. He had been scared he might have to face Johnny in a gun fight, but now he knew he had only to sit at the window with a target rifle, he felt that he could afford a grin.

'That'll be a pleasure,' he said

'You others stay out of sight downstairs. When Toni hits this bastard, you chase across the street, grab the two bags and come back here. It's got to be done fast. I've fixed it the cops will be out of the way, but not for long, so work fast' He turned to Massino, 'You like it, Mr Joe?'

'Yeah. You're using your head. So okay, I'll take a week off in Miami.' He stared at Andy. 'When I get back, I expect the money in the safe and those three straightened out.'

'That's my planning, Mr Joe.'

'When you have the money, I want Sammy taken care of,' Massino said to Benno. 'Take Ernie with you and smear that sonofabitch across a wall. I mean that. Smash him to bits! Take a can of gas with you. When you've finished smearing him, set him on fire.'

Benno grinned. 'Okay boss.'

Massino turned to Toni.

'There's the whore. You're the only one who's seen her. Take care of her. She'll run, but keep after her. Make her suffer. You don't work for me until you've found and fixed her, but you'll get paid.'

Toni nodded.

'That'll be another pleasure.'

When Massino had left the office, Andy said, 'Okay, we can relax. Sammy gets a call from Bianda in another hour. In an hour's time, Bianda could try for the money. We have to get this organized. Bianda may be cagey. He might wait a week. . . so, okay, we wait a week, but any minute of that week, he could show. . . so we wait.'

Waiting meant nothing to these men. They spent a third of their lives waiting.

Andy tapped Toni on his shoulder.

'When he shows, you have to nail him. Fluff this one and you get the treatment.'

Toni patted the target rifle. 'A kid of six. . .'

The big, airy room with its double bed, its two armchairs and its TV set seemed to have shrunk. The traffic sounds coming through the open window seemed to have increased. Tension hung in the room like a black canopy.

In bra and panties, Freda lay on the bed, her arm across her eyes. Johnny sat by the telephone, his eyes on his strap watch.

'Can't you call him now?' Freda asked, lifting her arm to look at Johnny. 'For God's sake! We've been waiting hours!'

'I warned you, baby,' Johnny said gently, 'this is a waiting game.' Sweat was trickling down his face. 'It's only five to five.'

'I'll go crazy if we have to wait much longer. All my goddamn life, I've had to wait for something!'

'Who hasn't?' Johnny wiped his face with his handkerchief. 'Everyone is waiting for something. Take it easy, baby. Think of the boat, the sea, the sun and you and me. Think of that.'

Her arm went back across her eyes.

'Sorry, Johnny. I'm on edge.'

On edge? Johnny suppressed a sigh. He looked at her, lying there, so desirable and to him, beautiful. On edge? He felt now the chill of fear. In spite of his warnings she didn't seem to realize what kind of jungle they were heading for.

They waited, listening to the traffic, hearing a police whistle and in the distance, an ambulance siren. The tension in the room built up. The minute hand of Johnny's watch crawled on. Could a minute last so long?

'Johnny!' Freda sat up. 'Please call him now.'

'Okay, baby.'

He picked up the receiver and dialled Sammy's number.

Listening to the burr-burr-burr on the line, he thought of the moment when he unlocked the locker and pulled the two heavy bags out and he closed his eyes. All that money!

Then Sammy's voice came on the line.

'Who's that?'

'Sammy? Johnny. You checked the bus station?'

'I checked it, Mr Johnny. There's no one there.'

Johnny leaned forward, his heart beginning to thump.

'You're sure?'

'Yeah. I went all over it. The boys have gone.'

'Where's Toni?' Johnny knew Capello was the danger man.

'I don't reckon he's back yet, Mr Johnny. The boss sent him to Florida. I haven't seen him.'

'Okay.' Johnny thought for a moment. The way south and out of town would take him past Sammy's place. 'Around midnight, I'll look in with the money. Be there.'

'Six thousand, Mr Johnny?'

'That's it. Be there,' and Johnny hung up. He looked at Freda who had got off the bed and was watching him. 'It's okay. They really think we're in Havana. We'll leave here at seven-thirty. Let's pack. I'll fix a Hertz car.'

'You really mean it's safe . . . you'll get the money?'

Johnny put his fingers into his shirt to feel his St Christopher medal it was a reflex action, but when his fingers felt nothing but the sweat-coated hairs of his chest, he again heard his mother's words *as long as you wear it nothing really bad can happen to you*

'We're going to try, baby. Nothing in this life is safe, but we're going to try.'

He picked up the phone book, found the number of Hertz-rent-a-car and called them. They said they would deliver a car to the hotel at 19 00

Freda pulled on her green trouser suit and she was doing her hair as Johnny hung up.

'The car's fixed,' he said, then going to his suitcase, he took out his gun and harness

Watching him, her eyes opened wide

'What are you doing?'

'Just being careful, baby' He smiled at her 'I don't think we'll need it, but one never knows'

'You're frightening me, Johnny.'

'Go on packing. This isn't the time to be frightened . . . this is the time to look ahead . . . to the future. This time tomorrow, you and me will be worth one hundred and eighty-six thousand dollars!'

'Yes'

While she was carefully folding her new clothes into the suitcase, Johnny looked out of the window at the blue sky and the white clouds

His fingers went to his shirt, then dropped away.

He saw the little plop of water as the medal had hit the lake. He knew he could be walking into a trap. Sammy might be betraying him. He knew that, but what else was there to live for? If he didn't try to get the money, sooner or later, they would find him. So he had to try. He just might be lucky. He just might have the boat for a few months, but this he was sure of . . . they would never take him alive. He looked over at Freda as she shut the lid of the suitcase. She and he, he decided, must share this destiny. They could have luck. Again he thought of the boat. He thought of the medal. That was superstition. There was still luck left.

In less than four hours, he would know if luck meant anything.

The hours crawled by. The lights over the bus station were on. The crowds were thinning out. The big clock above the bus station read 23.00

'I've got to take a pee,' Toni said. 'My back teeth are floating.'

'Hurry it up!' Andy snapped and eased his aching muscles.

Toni put down the target rifle and went fast to Massino's toilet

As he laid down the rifle, Johnny drove into the parking lot of the bus station

'Here we are, baby,' he said, his heart thumping. 'You take over Now listen, if anything bad happens, drive away fast You understand? Don't wait just go' He took from his hip pocket the last of Sammy's money and dropped the bills in her lap 'It'll be all right, but I want to be sure Go back to the Welcome hotel You understand?'

Freda shivered

'Yes It will be all right, Johnny?'

He put his hand on hers.

'Don't be scared I'll get the money and come right back You take off as soon as I'm in Head up street It's easy At the traffic lights you turn left Don't drive too fast'

'Oh, Johnny!'

He pulled her to him and kissed her

'It's going to work out.'

'I love you'

'Those are the best words I love you too,' then he walked into the bright lights and towards the luggage lockers

Andy spotted him He wasn't fooled by his shaven head He recognized Johnny's walk, his square shoulders, his short, thick-set body

'Toni!'

Freda shifted across the seat and under the steering wheel She stared through the dusty windshield, seeing Johnny disappear into the station She sensed he and she were in danger Her mind raced Could she live on a boat? She hated the sea Maybe once they had all this money, she could persuade him to give up this boat idea Her dream was a luxury villa somewhere in the sun and to meet interesting people With all that money, people would converge on them There would be a swimming pool, a Cadillac and servants Once a year they would go to Paris where she would buy clothes That would be life! A boat! Who the hell but Johnny wanted a boat!

Her fingers gripped the steering wheel

There was time . . . first the money If he really loved her, she could talk him out of this stupid idea of buying a boat

Johnny reached the locker He paused, looking right and left The locker aisle was deserted A voice boomed over the tannoy system 'Last bus for Miami No 15' He sank the key into the lock, opened the door and dragged out the two heavy bags

As he dumped them on the floor, his mind moved triumphantly to his dream A forty-five-footer with shining brass work and he at the helm, steering out to sea with the spray against his face and the sun beating down on him And in this image which

flooded his mind, Freda took no part. It was he and the forty-five-footer and the rise and fall of the deck.

He grabbed up the bags and started back across the station towards where he had parked the car. He was still moving fast, within a few yards of the car, seeing Freda at the wheel, when his life exploded into darkness.

Freda saw him coming and she caught her breath in a gasp of relief. Then she saw a tiny red spot appear in his shaven head, the bags drop from his hands and his short, thick-set body fold to the ground.

She sat there petrified, watching a thin stream of blood flowing from Johnny's head. She heard a woman screaming. Then she saw three men come fast out of the shadows, snatch up the bags and disappear.

She pushed the gear lever to 'Drive' and moved the car out of the parking lot.

Dry retching sobs shook her as she drove out of town.

Sammy prowled around his tiny room. He kept looking at his cheap alarm clock on the bedside table. The time was 01 30. Mr Johnny had said he would bring six thousand dollars to him by midnight. Cloe had telephoned. She had said that she would give him until tomorrow morning and then she would ask Jacko to take care of her. Sammy said for her not to worry. He would have the money for her and she could fix an appointment with her doctor any time tomorrow.

Again he looked at the clock.

Mr Johnny had promised. What was happening?

Then he heard footsteps coming up the stairs and he relaxed, relieved and now happy. Here was Mr Johnny with the money! How could he have doubted him? When Mr Johnny made a promise it was a promise!

A knock came on the door.

Six thousand dollars! He would take Cloe south after her operation. She had always wanted to see Miami. His goddam brother would now be out of trouble! His mother would be happy!

Sammy danced across the room to open the door.

The fat, elderly man smiled at her. He was well dressed with dyed black hair and shiny white false teeth.

'Piss off,' Freda said. 'Try someone else.'

The fat man grimaced, then walked down the long street to where other girls were waiting.

Freda leaned against the wall, trying to rest her aching feet. It was now two months since Johnny had died. The money he had

given her had run out. She knew she had been extravagant, but she had to have some decent clothes. Now she was back on the game but Brunswick wasn't profitable. It was a town full of kinky, elderly men and she had promised herself she would never pander to perverts. But, she told herself, she would now have to save enough money to go either south where the men would appreciate her talents and looks or go north and get into the call girl racket again.

As she leaned against the wall she thought of Johnny, a sweet guy. She could have married him. He and his dream boat! Well, everyone had to have their dreams. All that money, so near so far!

It began to rain. The street now was deserted. The other girls had called it a night. She opened her shabby purse and checked her money, thirteen dollars.

Well, money was money. She snapped her purse shut and started down the long street towards the tiny room she now called her home.

Toni Capello, who had been watching her for the past half hour, moved after her. His hand slid into his coat pocket and his fingers closed around the bottle of acid.

It was while Freda was undressing that she heard a knock on her door. Wearily, she pulled on a wrap.

'Who's there?' she called.

The knock sounded again.

Without thinking, she crossed the room and opened the door.

THE MANIPULATORS

John Rossiter



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The Author

John Rossiter was born in 1916. After being educated at military schools, he joined the Wiltshire Constabulary in 1939, served in the R A F during the war and was discharged in 1946 with the rank of Flight-Lieutenant. He returned to the police service and had become Detective Chief Superintendent 1/c County CID when he retired in 1969. John Rossiter has achieved success as a writer of thrillers, he is married and now lives in Spain.

To my sister, Lynne Andrews

Dodson knew that once manipulators found a crack in a man's skin big enough to insert a dirty finger, they worked at it until the whole fist was inside, drawing out the guts inch by inch

CHAPTER ONE

HE WAS A BIG MAN, a bulky overcoated and gloved mass in the shadowed recess of the shop doorway. The frigid wind of a black January's evening flung frequent handfuls of stinging brittle snow crystals against his face, making him blink his eyelids. Occasionally he wiped away tears of cold with the back of his hand.

Few pedestrians used the shut-up street. Those that did were red-nosed and chilled with somewhere else to go and with no interest in the motionless figure. Once a prowling ownerless dog sniffed, shivering at his trouser ends, grinning obsequiously at the unresponsive form. He growled, 'Push off, pooch, I'm busy,' but gently, for he liked dogs. Very much more than any criminal he could bring to mind.

An occasional car passed, casting a momentary sweep of light into the doorway but revealing little more than a deeper shadow in the darkness of the recess and the glitter of watching eyes from the paler disc of the face.

Detective Sergeant Harry Dodson was working the few sour acres of squalid brickwork and masonry he called his own. Its streets tilted and ran like rivulets of dirty quicksilver down to the scabby slab-sided warehouses and skeletal cranes of the docks where tethered ships lay bleak and silent on the heaving black water, whipped by the bone-slicing wind blowing in from the estuary outside.

In his more imaginative moments, Dodson would compare the city in which he served to a huge sprawling body. His share of it, he claimed without rancour—and, indeed, with a grain of pride—was analogous to the anus and genitals. He saw it—being a blunt man—unequivocally in those terms. He was required to deal with the human faeces that lived in it. The stinks of its nastiness, of its dishonesty and perversion and corruption were familiar to his nostrils. He knew every rat-run in the area of its shabby and soot-blotched unloveliness, every cheap café and scuffy boozery; every betting shop, strip-club and dirty-book store, each clip joint and chiselling gaming pad had been itemized in his memory bank. He knew the men who owned and operated them, their records of conviction, each villain's *modus operandi*, their women and associates and the vermin they employed to do their lesser dirty work. Men who either hid their hatred and fear of him behind cautious lizard's eyes and smiling teeth or who possessed enough confidence in their invulnerability to show

openly their arrogance and contempt. Dodson had proved it often enough to be a misplaced arrogance

He had patrolled the area as a smooth-fleshed probationer constable of twenty-one. He had investigated its criminality, first as a CID Aid, then as a hard-grained and implacably relentless Detective Sergeant. The twelve years of his service life spent there had made it his own. Because of this it was called Dodson's Crotch by his colleagues in the Criminal Investigation Department. It would still be Dodson's Crotch in fifty years' time, long after Dodson himself had been forgotten and the reason for its so being called, lost.

Dodson was a swarthy man of thirty with hard-planed features and an uncompromising jawline. He shaved his flat cheeks twice a day to a glossy bluish smoothness with a straight-edge razor. His hair was black, crisply waved and cropped short, the nose wedge-shaped and wide nostrilled and thrust out formidably from his face. His umber-irised eyes possessed the disconcerting directness of a policeman's authoritative stare. His mind was unimaginative and he rarely smiled. When he did he had either reached the ceiling of a rare amiability or was in his most dangerous mood.

A T-shaped scar disfigured his forehead. The man who smashed the bottle in his face had regretted it. Dodson had pulled himself to his feet, smiling through a bloody mask, to break his attacker's jaw in two places. And then to drag him from the circle of his sympathetic but intimidated friends to the nearest telephone for transport. Indeed, he looked the type of man who could suffer the extremes of pain without showing it.

Overall, his features reflected a man of serious purpose who saw his environment in terms of unrelieved black or white. A man to whom professional criminals were indefensible parasites deserving only of punitive, retributive punishment. It was this hatred of a sort that sent him padding around dark, frozen streets hunting them when he could have been off duty.

Despite his bulk he was light on his feet and walked daintily like a well-fed tom cat. Beneath his heavy overcoat he wore one of the brown suits he invariably effected. It would be wrinkled and creased and in places buttonless where his big body strained against the stitches of the fabric. His gloved hands, blunt-fingered and broad, made paralytically jolting fists. He was a hard-muscled, heavy-framed man, capable, it seemed, of walking through a door without opening it.

He moved out from the shelter of his concealment into the bitter wind, crossing the street at an angle. He was hunting blind, leaning heavily on his instincts. The following day's statistics would show that during the night an average of ten crimes of

breaking and entering premises would have been committed in Dodson's Crotch alone. No amount of computer-inspired prognostication would indicate precisely those premises fated for despoliation. But Dodson was positioning himself where he might reasonably anticipate the breaking into at least one of them.

By now the numbing cold had reached his thighs and the snow crystals peppered his skin without his feeling their sting. Otherwise, despite its gradual cooling beneath the insulating layers of clothing, his body showed a monolithic indifference to the chilling temperature. His lungs needed one of the narcotizing cigarettes he had been trying for months to give up but he decided against it as a small discipline.

He turned the corner into the next street, as silent and inconspicuous as a wind-blown shadow and entered a doorway near its junction. Away from the city's centre there was an unusual quietness, broken only by the occasional footfalls of the few passers-by and the rattle and creak of loose fall-pipes and shutters in the swirling, tugging wind. Dodson's ears collected and identified the different noises, alert for the tell-tale muffled rending of splintering wood or breaking glass, the clink of metal on metal. His eyes covered the length of the barred and shuttered shop fronts opposite him and the blank dark windows above.

A yellow-doored panda car braked to a halt at the far end of the street and its uniformed driver alighted, flipping a cigarette butt into the gutter, sparks spraying from it into the wind. He beat his hands together against the cold and turned up the collar of his greatcoat. Dodson watched him testing conscientiously the security of each shop door, depressing and leaning on its handle, then flashing the beam of his torch into the interior.

When he reached the doorway in which Dodson was concealed and his torch illuminated the watching figure, the big detective put a gloved finger to his lips and frowned warningly.

PC Tasker, his surprise only momentary, pushed down on the door handle at Dodson's side. 'Bloody cold, sergeant,' he whispered. 'Something special?' Dodson was held in high regard by the beat men. While only a rank above them, his immense status rested on his reputation as a dedicated thief catcher of unshakable courage.

He shook his head. 'Waiting. Carry on with what you're doing.' He was a laconic man. What he had said was a dismissal of further conversation. Another sergeant might have rasped Tasker with a reprimand for smoking on duty.

Dodson listened for Tasker's rubber-soled boots to reach the end of the street and cross it, coming within his vision. He watched him checking the doors on the other side, methodically and carefully, missing none. After he had tested the door of a shop within

fifty yards of where Dodson waited, a slight movement of the slatted blind covering the glass of the door caught the detective's eye. So brief was the flicker of displacement of the plastic strips that he could have been mistaken. Tasker was approaching his car and Dodson had no way of recalling him without revealing his presence. And this suited him too. The premises from which he thought he had seen the revealing twitch of movement was lettered L J SYMES, LICENSED PAWNBROKER in peeling gold leaf over its window glass. The front of it was ostentatiously barred and grilled and seemingly impregnable to anything less than a thermic lance and a couple of hours' sweating hard labour. But Dodson knew that the rear would be the soft underbelly of the premises for the experienced breaker.

He waited a further few minutes before drifting from the street as inconspicuously as he had entered it.

At the rear of the line of shops he found a small grey van. He removed a glove and felt the metal of the radiator behind the padding of card shielding. There remained a faint warmth in it. The number plates had been spattered with mud and the letters and figures made indistinguishable. Dodson rubbed a clear patch in the rear plate with the sole of his shoe, memorizing the registration number. Before leaving it he hammered a frozen clod of earth into the end of the exhaust tube with the heel of his palm. The van would travel less than thirty yards before the engine choked itself to death on its own gases.

The rear entrance to the pawnbroker's shop led through a walled patch of untended grass and shrubbery grown wild. The gate to it was locked and there was nothing he could see to support his suspicion that the premises had been entered. At this point caution and practice demanded he should seek assistance. But the thought of his being mistaken, of being labelled an over-imaginative alarmist, decided him against doing so. It also fitted his temperament that he should work alone. He might, he considered in justification, have misinterpreted the movement of the plastic blind. It could have been no more than a delayed dislodgement caused by Tasker's testing the door, the wind piercing a crack in the woodwork or the shop's cat. If it possessed one. He listened but the rattling of dried leaves and the wind's scraping of paper and debris in the lane overrode any sounds that might be coming from the shop. There were no lights in the lane and he saw only by the faint glow-worm gleam of the stars.

He clambered on to the dustbin standing beneath the brick wall, its lid sagging beneath his weight, and dropped into the courtyard on to iron-hard earth. It was littered with cardboard boxes and sacks of discarded rubbish. He pushed carefully through the bushes, rattling their stiff frozen leaves, finding the cement

path He tiod it soundlessly, lowering each descending toot in slow motion

Reaching the door he removed his gloves and stuffed them in a pocket From another he withdrew a small flat torch He put a broad thumb over its lens and switched it on The light diffused pinkly around the thumb's edge with just enough illumination to show him that the two large padlocks securing the door had been cut through and then replaced in the staples, giving to any casual inspection the appearance of continued security There were fresh jemmy marks on the wood near the mortice lock

Dodson grasped the ice-cold brass door handle in his left hand and twisted it slowly, pushing the door forward until he felt it meet an obstruction with its lower edge He took a knife from his trousers pocket and opened it Bending his knees he inserted the blade beneath the door and slid it sideways, groping for the wooden wedge he expected to be there When the blade met resistance he pushed the obstruction sideways until he felt it loosen He turned the handle again and swung the door open soundlessly

Inside, closing the door behind him, he stood for a minute, allowing the irises of his eyes to shutter and adjust to the increased darkness Out of the wind it was very little warmer but he could hear without interference from extraneous noises There were small distant sounds of movement coming from the front of the building overlaid by the sharp hissing of escaping gas The hairs on the nape of his neck tingled and he exhaled his satisfaction in a small cloud of condensation.

Obscuring the torch lens once more with his thumb and switching it on, he moved silently along the short passage, negotiating a right-angled bend more by the feel of his elbow along the wall than by the dim glow he allowed his vision He cursed under his breath the scrape and rustle of his clothing, even the unwelcome banging of his heart against his rib cage which was the only physical evidence of his doing anything more unusual or hazardous than scrubbing his teeth

At the end of the passage was another door It too bore the freshly made striations of a forcefully levered jemmy From the crack beneath it diffused a hair-line of light and the pungent stink of burning paint and hot metal The hissing sounded clearer, more insistent, and he could hear the muffled rumble of subdued voices

He sucked in a deep lungful of the cold air and grasped the handle, twisting it with the slowness of a growing plant, holding the handle fully opened and pushing at it The door gave fractionally, meeting the solid resistance of another wedge Releasing the handle with the same care as he had used opening it he stooped, seeing the black patch of the wedge's nose interrupting

the crack of light at his toes. The blade of the knife, cautiously inserted and pressed against the side of the wedge, failed to move it. He knew that a wedge, properly fitted, would hold the impact of a shoulder charge until the hinges of the door gave way.

He straightened and settled himself to wait, his ungloved hands pushed into his overcoat pockets. Through the wooden slab of door which he faced came the insistent clink of metal on metal, the unidentifiable sounds of movement and talking. Straining his ears, he could neither identify any words nor decide how many men were active there. Nor was it a point that particularly worried him. He checked the luminous cuneiform characters on the dial of his wristwatch. It was eight-thirty. Early for this kind of a break-in job, he thought, but being a Sunday with bone-freezing weather made it logically less liable to detection by a patrolling constable. Tasker had been an exception in that he had been early in performing his required checking of lock-up premises.

Dodson considered his recollected layout of the shop. He had visited it many times in the pursuit of stolen property. Symes the proprietor specialized as a side line in the quick disposal of illicitly purchased silver and jewellery. If he was less than helpful to the police in their inquiries it was understandable, stemming only from a natural disinclination to be charged with unlawfully receiving stolen goods. Dodson thought that Symes's safe being screwed—probably by the men from whom he received his loot—was in every way an act of natural justice. He recalled a door behind the counter leading to the small overcrowded office with its ancient green-enamelled safe hidden behind the sliding doors of its specially built cupboard. And Symes, being no man to suicidally declare his true income to the Inspector of Inland Revenue, would have money in it. He had also refused advice on the installation of an alarm system. On the basis, Dodson knew, that its triggering off would be an open invitation for the police to visit his premises. Something that could lead to embarrassing questions about many of the *objets d'art* he kept there.

Dodson waited, as patient as a hunting cat, ignoring the cold invading his motionless body, his senses canalized on the sounds coming from within the office, interpreting as best he could the progress of the rape of the safe. When the hissing stopped there followed the screeching of metal being torn apart and a distinct growling of satisfaction, telling him the end was approaching.

By his watch it came after ten minutes of the noise of hurried movement and the collecting together of heavy objects. Then he heard the wedge being kicked away by a foot and the door swung open.

The man standing there in the rectangle of dim orange light opened his mouth in shocked surprise, his tongue wagging sound-

lessly at the sight of the big man barring his exit. He held a black-painted oxygen cylinder under one arm.

Dodson put his hand flat against the man's chest, shoving him violently backwards. The cylinder dropped as he fell sprawling to the floor and Dodson strode over him into the room.

A second man, crouched in the act of putting tools into a leather bag, grabbed instinctively and hurled it at the approaching detective. It was swiftly done and the bag struck him heavily on the shoulder, knocking him sideways with the impact. The first man, scrambling to his feet, dived for the door. Dodson's fingers reached out and clutched at an ankle, pulling him crashing on his face to the floor. As he raised himself again, Dodson chopped him on the side of the throat with the cutting edge of his open hand and he fell back groaning, jerking his legs in response to the brain telling his paralysed body to run.

From the shop came the sound of a door being opened and the rattle of plastic slats against glass. Dodson swore, then stood and pulled his prisoner to his feet, slamming his shoulder-blades against a steel cabinet of filing drawers. His nose bled a thin trickle and he sagged in Dodson's grasp. The detective swung him around, transferring his hold to a choking forearm lock over the throat from behind and lifting him helplessly on to his toes. With his free hand he withdrew a pair of handcuffs from an inner pocket, rapping the ratcheted circlet against the man's wrist-bone, clipping it securely. He dragged him backwards on his heels, supporting the solid weight of him, never allowing him to regain his physical balance, then passing the unused circlet of the handcuffs behind the inlet pipe of a wall radiator and on to the man's other wrist. He did it silently and with the competence of having secured many other unwilling prisoners.

The outer shop was empty and the door open, the street outside deserted. He heard no echoes of running shoes or any sound of the van being started. He shrugged philosophically. The escape of the second man would exacerbate his original failure to seek assistance but he refused to allow it to fret him.

He returned to the office and untied the yellow duster dimming the light bulb. The air was blue with an acrid smoke that stung his eyes. The prisoner was wrenching his wrists against the steel grasp of the handcuffs, panting his impotence.

Dodson regarded him calmly. 'Stop it,' he said. His voice came from deep in his chest. 'That won't buy you anything. I know who you are.' He searched through the card index of his mind for facts to fit the face before him. 'Hooper. Edward William Hooper. Convictions for storebreaking and theft.'

Hooper nodded dumbly. He knew Dodson too.

The detective looked around him. The office was a shambles of

scattered, trodden-on papers and account books. The safe, man-handled from its cupboard, had been turned face downward on to a sack. A ragged hole with melted edges showed in its back plate. A tiny radio, tuned to police transmissions on the short wave-band, crackled and hissed at its side. Dodson pushed at a bulging handkerchief bundle with the toe of his shoe and it fell open, showing gold and silver bracelets and jewelled rings.

The oxygen cylinder lay where Hooper had dropped it. A second cylinder lay with a coil of rubber tubing and an acetylene blow-torch. The bag thrown at Dodson had spilled its contents on the floor. Among the case-openers, drills and bolt-cutters, he saw a pistol. He frowned, picking it up, recognizing it as a Luger automatic. Pulling back the cocking slide he checked there was no magazine clip in the butt, no round in the barrel. He placed it on the desk for later fingerprint examination.

Hooper swallowed. 'I didn't know it was there, Mr Dodson. Honest.'

'Of course not,' Dodson said ironically. 'It's all one great big surprise.' He stood behind the doubled-up Hooper, running flat palms down his flanks and legs, feeling beneath his armpits and inside his shoes. Then he searched his clothing. From a jacket pocket he removed a loaded magazine of 38 bullets. He held it under Hooper's nose and the man flinched. 'Another surprise?' he asked.

Hooper remained silent for long moments. Then he said, 'I never saw it before in my life. You planted it on me. And I want you to write that down in your bloody notebook. Exactly as I said it.'

'I was waiting for you to say that,' Dodson's face was without expression. 'Ah!' He pulled a thick bundle of bank notes from another of Hooper's pockets. 'And these?'

Hooper's eyes flickered. He possessed the desperate nothing-to-lose courage of a rat with its tail caught firmly in a trap. 'They're mine. You're not taking those.' There was newfound aggression in his voice.

Dodson placed them on the desk with the pistol and magazine. 'Who was with you?'

Hooper bared his teeth at him, not bothering to answer.

His other pockets yielded an ignition key, a handkerchief, cigarettes and matches. Nothing more. Dodson unlocked the handcuff on his right wrist and pulled it out from behind the radiator pipe, holding the straining arm firmly while he snapped it back on.

Hooper flinched as the ratchet teeth bit into his flesh. 'You bastard!' he shouted. 'You hurt me!'

'So I did. I'll make a note of that too.'

Hooper was young, muscular and bristle-scalped and tough with it. Even handcuffed he was no man to be careless with. He regarded his pinioned wrists and licked his lips. He looked at a point over the shoulder of the impassive Dodson. 'Can I talk to you, Mr Dodson? Sort of between you and me?'

'If you want to.' Caught in the act, a statement wasn't of importance and he was indifferent to what he might say. 'But I have to caution you that anything you say

'Shit!' Hooper interrupted him. 'Don't give me that crap for Christ's sake. Save it for the bloody magistrates. I want to talk to you off the record.' He hesitated. 'I'm willing to do a deal.'

'Yes?' Dodson's very impassivity encouraged Hooper.

'I'll buy that cuff key from you.'

'You will?' He looked interested. 'And how much would it be worth?'

Hooper nodded at the notes on the desk. 'There's over a thousand nicker there. I can forget I ever saw it.'

Dodson reached for the bundle and riffled through it. It was an untidy wodge of £10 and £5 notes, unmarked, used and untraceable. He rolled them into a cylinder and weighed them in his fist. The fingers he held them with shook slightly. He smiled. 'It's an idea. Just between you and me, eh?'

Hooper nodded eagerly. 'Shit, Mr Dodson, I wouldn't breathe a word.'

'I'm sure you wouldn't.' Anger darkened the detective's face and his left hand reached out suddenly, grasping Hooper's shirt front and coat lapels and jerking him forcibly to him with the sound of tearing linen. At the same time his right hand screwed the bundle of notes deep into the startled wide-open mouth, forcing it past the obstructive teeth, ramming the tongue into the back of the throat.

Hooper made a raucous cawing noise, writhing helplessly in Dodson's grasp. His face turned a dull red as he fought for breath, his goggling eyes watering fiercely, his head wagging helplessly in his efforts to choke out the suffocating bundle.

Dodson shook him savagely. '*You*,' he snarled. '*You* try to bribe me!' He pulled the saliva-fouled notes from Hooper's mouth and threw them back on the desk, shaking him again like a mastiff worrying a rat and pushing him backwards into a chair.

Hoarse whistling sounds came from the man's chest as he sucked air into his lungs through his blood-smeared mouth. His eyes were agonized and never left Dodson's face.

The detective waited, his anger dying. When the paroxysms of Hooper's anguish had passed, he said mildly, 'Next time, friend, I'll push whatever it is right down that big mouth of yours and make you really eat it.'

He pulled cigarettes from his pocket and lit one with an old brass friction-wheel lighter inhaling the smoke gratefully. He didn't offer Hooper one. Then he sat on the corner of the desk and drew the telephone handset nearer to him, dialling the number of Police Headquarters with a thick, rock-steady finger and whistling tunelessly through his teeth.

CHAPTER TWO

AN UNCOMMUNICATIVE HOOPER, tight-mouthed except for his bitter complaining about a lacerated wrist, had been searched, his personal property itemized and listed, his physical characteristics described on a Charge Sheet, and then put into a cell. A cell that had little about it likely to improve his surly aggressiveness. Its lime-washed walls, scored with defiant obscenities and anatomically illiterate drawings of female sex organs, enclosed a wooden box-like structure layered with a red rubber urine-proof mattress and two grey blankets. Black iron heating pipes struggled noisily and unsuccessfully against the frigid air of the night seeping in beneath the steel-sheathed door.

Hooper had been charged with Aggravated Burglary under Section 10 of *The Theft Act, 1968*, the maximum penalty for which was imprisonment for life. Dodson possessed no illusions about this boneless legal threat. Hooper was already waiting the arrival of Mulready the solicitor. And Mulready was a man who would take what appeared to be strong-fibred, hard-boiled facts and, by a process of pettifoggery and forensic wizardry, re-present them to the Court as things of brittle frailty, suggesting only that Hooper had been engaged in a venture little more serious than a schoolboyish prank and that whatever the police brought forward as evidence could be interpreted in other ways than those suggesting guilt.

Hooper's four years' freedom from being detected in committing the dishonesties by which he subsisted would be put forward—successfully and unassailably—as four years of pious endeavour in good citizenship. Heard in isolation, this grandmotherly, hot-water-bottled distortion of justice might suggest a kindly, civilized society. Dodson believed it to be the symptoms of a weak, vacillating one. Symptoms that encouraged and emboldened the hordes of marauding thieves and brought dismay and disillusion to the police. And Dodson was deeply disillusioned with the society that employed him and his colleagues to sweep its criminal streets, yet bound them by constraining checks and regulations, oversolicitous of the rights of the criminal, from doing so effect-

ively. He felt that the police service had been betrayed and emasculated by the judiciary and politicians.

Nothing had been said by either Dodson or Hooper about the proffered bribe although Hooper could properly have been charged with Common Law attempted bribery. But it would have muddled the issue, bringing under official scrutiny Dodson's own impulsive assault on a prisoner. Not that he would have worried for more than an hour or two. Despite his success with Hooper he was already under serious criticism for not putting into operation the regulation surround-and-search formula and, by implication, permitting the escape of the second man. Dodson was all the more irritated by his knowledge that he had been in the wrong.

Symes the pawnbroker, now in a cell adjacent to Hooper's, had found himself in the paradoxical position of being both accuser and accused, signing a Charge Sheet alleging that Hooper and one other person unknown had stolen from his safe the sum of £3,240 of which £1,200 remained unrecovered, being charged himself with the unlawful handling of the handkerchief bundle of stolen jewellery and some silverware found by Detective Inspector De Mora on his arrival in response to Dodson's telephone call.

Symes's well-acted astonishment at learning that the John Smith of an unrecorded and forgotten address had loaded a mass of identifiable stolen property into his naive trusting care had earned him a further three charges under *The Pawnbrokers Act 1872*, added to the Charge Sheet as an insurance against an equally naive and trusting jury believing him.

Dodson, having checked Local Records, now knew Hooper's associates. But none of the front and profile photographs he studied brought back a recognition of his momentary glimpse of the other man. He intended re-entering the Crotch to find him. And, because De Mora had given him a preliminary reprimand about lone-wolfing operations, promising more to come from the Detective Chief Superintendent, he needed a drink.

Police Headquarters, a decaying and worm-holed Victorian slum, stood in the broad High Street, a failed *cordon sanitaire* that separated the city's commercial quarter from the outskirts of the Crotch. Opposite it, providing a mostly neutral ground for the intermingling of the cigar and gin-and-tonic criminos with the professional and business men by good fortune or guile not yet joined their ranks, stood the Royal Fountain Hotel.

Dodson entered its plate-glass and red velvet-plush bar, shaking the thin plastering of snow from the shoulders of his overcoat. He sat at the corner table he had made his own by regular use. It

would irritate him to find it occupied for he generally preferred his own company

The table was flanked on one side by an illuminated tank of polythene-transparent fish, on the other by a screening mini-jungle of potted plants. A coal fire was within poking distance of his chair. More important to him, he could watch the whole length of the bar counter.

He opened his pocket book and began writing up his notes of the evening's events. He raised a finger to the maroon-jacketed waiter who would know he wanted his usual lager and sandwiches. There would be no food waiting him back in his rooms: no wife, no mistress to get it anyway. Women had never been attracted in swarms to his self-sufficient masculinity and he could convince himself it didn't matter. He possessed a sexual diffidence and self-doubt, the thread of sexuality running thinly and not very rumbustiously in his veins. It only occasionally thickened to a burning glow and this he could control without developing a neurosis.

He had noticed a short tubby man, his back against the mahogany counter, staring in his direction. He wore an old British Army Warm, the prerogative, Dodson had thought, of retired majors. An ochrous snuff colour, it was dry, suggesting he had been in the bar some time. His shoes were ox-blood red and highly burnished. The details of his description, noted without particular interest, were filed automatically in Dodson's memory.

When the detective had been served with his lager and sandwiches, the tubby man left the counter and walked across to him, standing with his back to the fire, a glass of watered gin in his hand.

'A cold evening,' he said. His voice went with the coat, clipped and rather high and used to telling junior officers they could smoke while he lectured them but to do it in a disciplined manner.

'Yes,' Dodson said shortly. 'It is.' He sensed the man wanted to go on talking. The prospect was an unwelcome one and he pointedly returned to the writing up of his notes.

'Do you mind if I join you?' Without waiting for an answer he fitted himself comfortably in the chair opposite the detective.

Dodson stopped writing and closed the pocket book, looking at him directly for the first time, his unblinking eyes steady, not hiding the fact he was considerably less than enthusiastic. 'As you wish,' he said expressionlessly.

The dark brown eyes meeting his were unabashed and varnished with an unsnubbable *bonhomie*. But behind the affability was a knowing slyness that Dodson saw and distrusted. His hair was an ungreied snuff-brown above a middle-aged round face.

There was an even dullness about the hair that suggested a wig, or the use of a darkener. He possessed a small thin-lipped mouth and a tight-nostriiled nose. To Dodson, he looked like a Public Relations Consultant who would sell himself first and his company second. He used an expensive line in deodorants. Beneath the unbuttoned British Wain he wore a fawn twill suit and a high-collared heather check shirt. The tie was an ill-matched purple and green. Thin flesh-coloured gloves covered his hands. On one wrist he wore a large black-dialled watch thick with stem winders and knobs. He had placed his leather outer gloves on the table with an orange-bowled pipe and his gin.

He held out a hand to Dodson. 'The name's Bradley, old man Wilfred Bradley.' He showed yellow pipe-smoker's teeth in an amiable smile. 'Forgive the gloves. I have *pustular psoriasis*. Uncomfortable but not fatal.' He neighed with high-pitched laughter. 'And not catching either,' he added as Dodson hesitated.

There were only two things the detective could do about the extended hand: offensively ignore it or shake it. He took it briefly, said 'Oh, yes?' and wiped his fingers on his thigh under the table. He didn't offer his own name.

'I'm sorry, Mr Dodson,' Bradley said. 'I'm disturbing you?'

'Now you've mentioned it, you are.' He picked up and bit at his cheese sandwich. There was nothing unusual about Bradley knowing his name. It meant only that he kept his ears and eyes open. Dodson was a familiar figure in the Royal Fountain.

'Ah! Forgive me. I'm only imposing on the basis of our having a mutual friend,' he persisted.

Dodson knew he was soon going to be forced to rudeness. The man was going to be a bloody nuisance. 'I'm glad to hear it, Mr Bradley,' he said with indifference.

'May I buy you a drink?'

'I have one,' Dodson said shortly, allowing his irritation to show. It had been a long day after a sleepless night and he wanted to finish his notes and eat without interruption. His earlier abrasive clash with De Mora hadn't made him any more amiable. 'Bluntly, Mr Bradley, I'd be happier to talk with you some other time. If it's business, see me at my office. If it isn't, I'm sure it won't spoil for keeping.'

'Our mutual friend,' Bradley reminded him, neither disconcerted nor abashed.

Dodson threw his sandwich back on the plate. It was beginning to taste of old sacking. 'All right. We have a mutual friend. You want to say something about him? Say it and get it over with.'

'His name is James Luckhurst.' He cocked his head, the bright eyes watching him carefully.

Dodson thought, then said, 'You've got the wrong man. I've

never heard of him. You're mistaken if you think he's a friend of mine.'

'No, *you* are mistaken, Sergeant Dodson,' he corrected him coolly. 'I'll concede he may be no friend of yours but he is certainly your brother-in-law.'

Dodson stiffened angrily, fixing him with his most unsettling flat stare. 'Don't talk such absolute cock, Bradley.' He eyed the gin glass on the table pointedly. 'Are you drunk?'

'I assure you he is and that I'm not drunk.'

Dodson felt a momentary unease. There was too much intelligence, too much confidence in Bradley's eyes to believe him either stupid or drunk. 'Listen,' he said leaning forward, his voice level, holding his rising anger in check. 'I don't know who you are or what you are getting at. But I'm beginning to find your attitude, your persistence, offensive. I do have a brother-in-law. His name isn't Luckhurst or anything like it. And I doubt very much whether he knows you.' He scowled. 'So now you've brought the subject up, explain yourself.' His big fists on the table tightened and blanched his knuckles.

If Bradley noticed, it didn't worry him. His expression was mockingly, almost servilely, apologetic. 'I didn't mean to be offensive, Mr Dodson, but I really do know what I'm talking about. And I want to help.' He slid a hand into an inside pocket of his jacket withdrawing a folded paper. He reached across, passing it to Dodson. 'You may keep it. It's only a copy.'

He picked up his pipe and, keeping his regard on Dodson, filled it from a rubber pouch.

Dodson unfolded the paper, dropping his eyes and reading it. Dated eight years previously, it was a Xeroxed copy of the record of a civil marriage performed by Her Majesty's Consul at Kuwait. The persons named in it were James Philip Luckhurst, a petroleum engineer, and Ursula Jane Dodson, Section Officer WRAF, and spinster.

He felt the blood draining from his face and the fingers holding the paper trembled. He had a sudden premonition of impending disaster. His sister was married to Bill Stephens and had been for five years. Bill was a Clerk in Holy Orders and more formally known in *Crockford's Clerical Directory* as the Reverend William Stephens MA, Vicar of St Benedict and All Saints at Parr in Norfolk. There were two children and one within a month or so of being born.

Dodson dabbed at the paper with a finger. 'I told you to explain,' he said harshly.

'I'm trying to, Mr Dodson,' Bradley answered mildly. He spoke around the stem of his pipe, puffing tobacco smoke. 'The facts are simple. Your sister, now Mrs William Stephens, I understand,

served as a Section Officer with 84 Squadron, RAF, in the Persian Gulf' He smiled as if seeking approval 'You knew this, of course' 'Go on'

'She met James Luckhurst He worked as an engineer for British Petroleum in Kuwait They fell in love—well, I assume your sister did, Mr Dodson—and were married by the British Consul there Apparently something you didn't know'

Dodson kept his face blank

Bradley continued 'I'm afraid,' he said, shaking his head, 'that our friend Luckhurst was a bit of a scoundrel He left your sister very much pregnant—I think he moved on to Muscat—and she attempted to kill herself'

'Liar'

'I really am not, old man'

'You bastard,' Dodson whispered 'You'd better justify what you're saying' But what Bradley said rang true. Ursula was just the tautly-strung psychoneurotic woman to have had that sort of a disastrous experience happen to her. And to still allow it, despite Bill's steady influence on her

'I intend to, Mr Dodson' He pulled out another folded piece of paper and handed it to him 'Again, only a copy, my dear chap But I imagine you'll recognize your sister's signature'

It needed only a glance at the bottom of the sheet for him to confirm it He read from its beginning, anger and apprehension shaking his fingers

Ursula, having been cautioned by a Wing Commander W. A. B. McCann, had said that being stationed at Muharraq in the Persian Gulf and on leave in Kuwait, had met and subsequently married James Philip Luckhurst, a drilling engineer employed at an oil installation in Umm Qusr Shortly afterwards, discovering herself to be two months pregnant, she had informed her husband and a violent quarrel ensued, resulting in his walking out on her Resentful and angry over his continued desertion, she had aborted the foetus and then, regretting it almost immediately and becoming deeply depressed, had taken the powder from several capsules of sodium amytal in her quarters Unsuccessful in her attempt, she had been admitted to hospital where her terminated pregnancy had been quickly discovered The signature endorsing the statement was clearly that of his sister. It was a tragic and stupid happening and, as Dodson recognized, typical Ursula, not really making sense But enough

He laid the statement down with the copy of the Record of Marriage His face was stony 'So?'

Bradley tapped his finger on the document 'You accept it?'

'I accept nothing that isn't proved' He was talking like a pompous fool and realized it 'These are just pieces of paper'

'Yes,' Bradley agreed 'Just pieces of paper But finishing up with a Commanding Officer's Board of Inquiry—all a matter of record, by the way—with your sister resigning her commission and returning home to England I need hardly add that her discharge papers show none of this It wouldn't be a matter of public knowledge'

'But *you* seem to know, Bradley'

'Only because Mr Luckhurst told me,' he said simply 'May I hasten to add that I'm only an intermediary—an unwilling one to be sure I don't know your sister Until this evening I didn't know you So I really am trying to be helpful' He beamed amiably 'You could call me a sort of ombudsman'

'You're a crook, Bradley I can smell it from here'

Bradley flapped a deprecatory hand 'I'm not offended, Mr Dodson I know you are under stress But you do see why Mr Luckhurst doesn't feel up to speaking to you himself?'

'You might wish *you* hadn't,' Dodson said grimly 'You're treading on highly dangerous ground'

'I know Again forgive me But Mr Luckhurst proposes emigrating to Australia soon Naturally, he wishes to tidy up his domestic affairs before doing so'

'Like cashing in on the situation?' Dodson's face was unpleasant

'Good Lord, no!' Bradley protested He drank unflurriedly from his gin glass 'But he does need advice He's a very worried man And, as he tells me, he might wish to get a divorce at a later date He's quite penitent, Mr Dodson, and would admit desertion quite frankly He was shocked, however, to read that she had remarried committed bigamy in fact' He watched Dodson alertly, judging the impact of his words 'His first reaction was to report it to the police, feeling so strongly as he does'

'Cut out the moralizing, Bradley' Dodson's face was white, the muscles of his jaws working in small knots

'After I'd spoken to him—and I hope I haven't done something unlawful in doing so—he rather saw things my way from a civilized, er, accommodating point of view'

'That point of view being financial?' The detective, staring at him across the separating table with his grim expression, thought, *I could kill him And, Christ help me, I want to*

Bradley held out a protesting hand 'Please, old man I admit I've financed his emigration but that was solely on the basis of an old friendship'

'But you want it back from me?'

Bradley looked hurt. 'You possess an unfortunate bluntness of expression, Mr Dodson' He gave an incredulous little laugh 'Can you imagine *me*?' He tapped a gloved forefinger on his chest

'You must believe me incredibly stupid or foolhardy—and I am neither—to attempt to blackmail a police officer. Particularly the redoubtable Detective Sergeant Harry Dodson.'

'So why all this?' he growled. He wasn't far from unthinking violence. 'Why are you telling me?'

Bradley lifted his eyebrows. 'You'd rather I told your sister? Her husband? Have Mr Luckhurst report the details to the Director of Public Prosecutions?' He started to rise. 'If you aren't interested enough.'

Dodson reached across and clamped Bradley's arm with his fingers, holding him from moving away. 'Sit down,' he snapped. 'I haven't even begun on you yet.'

Bradley sat, making no attempt to free his arm. 'Please take your hand away, Mr Dodson.' He indicated a leathery crew-cut man wearing a stiff white stormcoat. He was leaning on the bar counter and eyeing them calmly. 'My friend Mr Sams is getting anxious for my safety.'

'Your friend can get stuffed.' Dodson choked back the black anger promising to flare into violent action. Two men to expend it on would have been twice as satisfying as one. But other people were regarding him and Bradley with interest and he released him.

Bradley smiled. 'Please don't do that again.' Something in his soft politeness chilled the detective. 'Violence is never a rational alternative to sensible discussion.'

'Say what you want,' he said, 'and say it properly.'

'I want nothing.' He was relighting his pipe, creasing his eyes against the wreathing smoke. He flicked the match casually into the fire.

'You're telling me all this for something to do? Just to be sadistic? Because I can be sadistic too.'

'I want your friendship, Mr Dodson.'

'You're going the right way to earn it,' he said tightly. 'And I've already got a friend. He's a prison governor.' He stood. 'Come on.'

Bradley looked interested but made no move. 'Where to, Mr Dodson? Where are we going?'

'I'm taking you in. Arresting you on a charge of blackmail . . . demanding with menaces.'

'Very interesting, my dear chap.' He was completely unworried. 'May I first point out something to you? You are arresting me under Section 21 of *The Theft Act 1968*?'

Dodson frowned. 'Yes, I am.' The man was talking like a solicitor and he regarded him warily, hesitating. He was on the edge of a bluff that he might or might not be able to carry through.

'Just so long as you know what you're doing.' He looked up at the still-standing Dodson and smiled encouragingly. 'Permit me to

quote *A person is guilty of blackmail if, with a view to gain for himself or another or with intent to cause loss to another, he makes any unwarranted demand with menaces*

'So?' Dodson swallowed his impotence. The smooth-talking bastard was right. He hadn't made any demand at all.

Bradley smiled again. 'Need I go on? Although it seems a pity to waste it. I memorized it for just such an occasion, anticipating, I suppose, that you would momentarily forget your powers of arrest. You'll agree,' he said comfortably, 'that it doesn't appear to fit the circumstances of our conversation at all. I've sought only your friendship. A definite gain I admit, my dear fellow, but hardly one envisaged by the legislators who drafted the Act.' He bared his wrist, exposing the dial of the ornate watch. A thin wire ran from it up behind the cuff of his shirt sleeve. 'And,' he added almost apologetically, 'I'm afraid I've been discourteous enough to have taped our little talk. You know how faulty memory is. I'd hate to have you embarrassed by not being able to remember just what I did say. Or didn't.' He shook the watch. 'At least, I hope it was recorded. You know how unreliable they make gadgets these days and I'm not very good at making mechanical things work.'

Dodson snatched at his wrist and hooked a finger behind the wire, pulling at it and snapping it from the watch.

Strong sinewy fingers dug purposefully into his arms, holding him steady. Sams, Bradley's crew-cut companion, stood behind him. He was as tall as Dodson and lumpy with lean muscle under the stiff proofing of his stormcoat. He possessed the bottle-shaped shoulders and angular cheekbones of a fighter. His ears were crumpled like pink truffles and there were shiny patches of scar tissue over the sandy eyebrows. He smelt of embrocation and his bacon-rind lips smiled without humour. He looked at Bradley over Dodson's shoulder, seeking instructions.

Dodson spoke quietly, not resisting. 'Take your hands off me.' He rarely threatened in words. It was all in the tautness of his voice.

'Robert?' Bradley pulled his wrist free from Dodson's loosened grip. 'Thank you but it's quite all right. Mr Dodson and I aren't quarrelling.'

The hard fingers slackened on the detective's arms as he shrugged free of them, not bothering to look round at Sams. 'Tell him to shove off, Bradley, before I... well, just tell him.'

Bradley smiled agreeably. 'But of course.' To Sams, he said, 'Shove off, Robert, there's a good chap. Like Mr Dodson says, 'I'll scream if I need you.' He rubbed his wrist. 'Please sit down, old man. You're being very conspicuous.'

Dodson sat. There was a leaden weight in his chest he wanted to puke up. He thought of his sister and her so very vulnerable

husband He knew he was going to do a lot, to take a lot of stick, before he allowed Bradley to destroy her marriage, to label her children bastards He said heavily, 'All right, Bradley Stop being so bloody polite and say what you have to say'

'I like you, Harry' He said it admiringly 'You don't mind if I call you that?'

'I bloody well do'

Bradley beamed approvingly 'That's what I like A man of direct simple action with no compromising Rare qualities, Harry. And when your bluff is called, no useless recriminations I think we're going to get on together very well indeed'

Dodson eyed him savagely 'You won't ever know when the bluffing stops, Bradley Even if your facts are correct—and I don't admit them yet—bigamy isn't so much of a crime'

'No,' he admitted cheerfully, 'it isn't Seven years' imprisonment maximum Which your so very attractive sister would never get, of course And in view of our friend Mr Luckhurst's desertion, you and I know she might never be charged' He frowned and pursed his lips 'But that isn't it, is it, Harry? It's what it would do to her present marriage her happiness' He shrugged 'But perhaps I'm being too sentimental If your policeman's conscience suggests that Mr Luckhurst should make his complaint . '

Dodson made a noise in his throat 'What do you want, Bradley?'

'I told you before, Harry Your friendship'

'Bollocks! What sort of friendship?'

Bradley stood 'The world's a lonely place without friends, Harry We can all do with as many as we can get' He buttoned his coat, then put the leather outer gloves over those he already wore He hadn't finished his gin and he left it 'I'm sure you'll want to speak to your sister before seeing me again' He looked at his watch 'Still going,' he said 'Say I telephone you at ten tomorrow? At your office' He held his hand up, palm towards the detective 'Don't bother I already have the number Oh! I'd forgotten' He touched his side pocket 'I have the recording spoofs here You'd like a transcript, Harry? As a sign of mutual confidence?'

'Stuff it, Bradley'

'All right I trust you, Harry I really do I hope you trust me'

'Like a rattlesnake'

Bradley left him abruptly and the detective watched sombrely as he and Sams left without a backward glance at him He held his hand out in front of him There was an unstoppable tremor in the fingers That, he knew, was a bad sign and needed something done about it Preferably something violent to Bradley and his brutal-looking friend Sams He reduced the last of his cheese sandwiches to a ruin of crumbs while he thought about it

He heard the sharp indrawing of her breath, could visualize the bleaching shock on her attractive features, the trembling of the too-generous mouth

There was a silence for long seconds, then the ghost of her whisper strained through the long miles of cable 'Harry . I how did you find out?'

'It's true then?' He was harsh when he had meant to be gentle. He was being a policeman with her, not a brother, uncertain yet which was the more important. *You unutterably stupid bitch!* he said savagely under his breath Bradley with his sly knowing eyes and smooth ambiguous threats was a dark shadow in his mind.

Her voice shook, sounded shrunken 'Harry I'm frightened What has happened?'

'Don't go into details,' he warned her 'Don't refer to relationships This call is going through the Headquarters switchboard Just answer my questions as briefly as you can You made a statement to a Wing Commander McCann? In Kuwait?'

'Yes,' she whispered 'In Muharraq'

'And what is in it is true?'

'Harry . I'm so ashamed . '

'Stop it How could you do it to Bill of all people?' He wanted to shout, *It was only an odd husband floating about! A baby you aborted!*

'I believed him dead, Harry Honestly I did isn't he?'

'I don't know. And it doesn't make a lot of difference, does it?' He was as cold as if dealing with someone from the Crotch 'But if he ever was, he's been resurrected'

'Oh God! I really did think him dead, Harry'

'That isn't enough, is it, Ursula You could have got a divorce on the grounds of desertion Or on a presumption of death'

'I dare not, Harry I'd met Bill when it mattered then it was too late to tell him Please understand . '

'You should have been honest about it' He was growing quietly furious. 'Bill might have understood Christ! That's part of his job'

'No' She was definite 'I know him I love him, Harry' Her words were shrivelled black flowers of mourning and a terrified plea

'Why did you think Luckhurst was dead?' He knew he wasn't going to believe her

She gave a little moan 'He'd he'd gone away it was so long I thought'

He'd heard the same sort of fumbling guilt-ridden words so many times before 'You just wanted to believe him dead,' he said flatly 'That isn't anywhere near the same thing'

'God forgive me, Harry,' she whispered, 'but I did. He was hateful.'

'I'm sure he was. But that's never been a relevant factor in committing bigamy.'

'Harry, please.'

'Do you know a man called Wilfred Bradley? In his late forties or early fifties, short and thick-set. Probably wearing a wig?'

'No. Oh, Harry,' she said tremulously. 'Then she was shrill. I . . . I'll kill myself. How can I face Bill . . . the children.' Hysteria made her words jerky.

'*Ursula*.' He rapped her name out. 'Pull yourself together. We haven't got to face anyone yet. We may not have to if you act sensibly and stop being hysterical.'

'I feel filthy . . . rotten . . . ' He heard the sound of muffled forlorn weeping.

'That's something,' he said coldly, for tears embarrassed him, 'you should have felt before.'

'Oh, God, but I did. But there was no going back once I'd let Bill believe . . . '

'No. Nor is there now.' He waited a few seconds for the crying to subside. 'Are you all right? You're not going to cry again?'

'I'm sorry. You hate me for this, don't you?'

'I want you to control yourself. I need your help. Describe Luckhurst to me.'

He waited, listening to the hissing of static over the wire.

'Yes,' she said at last. 'He . . . he would be about thirty-five now. He was tall—about six feet—and thin . . . '

'Hair?'

'Dark brown. And he wore a moustache. God, Harry! Must I?'

'Yes, you must,' he said implacably. 'His date of birth?'

'I'm sorry, I've forgotten. In November sometime.'

'You have a photograph?'

'No, Harry, you know I wouldn't.'

'I'll want more later. Think about the details. His background and job, any relatives.'

'Yes.' Her voice was numbed. 'Will you tell me what has happened?'

He shook a cigarette from its packet and thumbed a flame to it from his lighter. He inhaled deeply, his lungs joining *De Mora* as a matter of comparative lesser importance. He gave her the facts of his interview with Bradley, briefly and without mentioning the names again. 'This man I spoke to,' he said, 'is a hard-nosed swine for all his soft talk. I've got to keep him sweet, Ursula. At least until I can get us both out from under.'

She moaned again. 'I can't let this happen to you, Harry. Your job . . . you'll get into trouble. Not on my account.'

He made a noise in his throat 'It's happening and nothing you or I do now can stop it And I'm not the sort of man likely to let him walk all over me Or you ' But for all his apparent confidence, he knew it wasn't going to be that easy Bradley was posing no trivial threat He gentled his voice 'Worry about yourself if you have to but don't have a guilt complex about me I like to do my own worrying And don't do anything stupid, Ursula Promise?'

'I promise, Harry'

'God's honour?' He had last used that binding oath when they were children together

She gave a shaky laugh that was hollow with sadness 'God's hon . Oh, Harry! *It's Bill* His car's coming in the drive. . '

He cut across her words 'I'll telephone again,' he said hastily 'Go upstairs and put your face right before he sees it'

He looked thoughtfully at the purring receiver on which he had been abruptly disconnected, shaking his head morosely as he replaced it He knew with even more certainty he was going to have to do something about protecting her He'd known it while Bradley had been taking his time in getting to the point he would reach later He considered what he had said to her. He had been cruel but it had needed saying He still saw no reason why he should be maudlin about it.

The building was quiet and ticking over gently with its holding force of Operations Room staff Dodson suddenly felt bleakly alone with his troubles and needing the sympathy and understanding of a woman He couldn't think of one who would give it Or from whom he would want it He pushed the thought away as a weakness, taking a fresh cigarette and unhooking the receiver He dialled 01-230 1212 and spoke to Scotland Yard's C4 Department, asking for a records check on Bradley, Sams and Luckhurst Without their dates of birth he knew he couldn't be too optimistic about turning something up on any of them The results, or lack of them, would be on his desk the following morning He should have sent a Telex message but that would have left a record for De Mora to see and, inevitably, inquire into

He took out his pocket book and started writing in the notes about Hooper's arrest

CHAPTER FOUR

DODSON cared for his old Zephyr as a man might his ageing, faded mistress He had anthropomorphized it to the point where it had become endowed with a personality To him, the car was clearly female, needing affection to keep her going He never allowed

any person other than a garage mechanic to drive her. No more, had she actually been his mistress, than he would have permitted another man to sleep with her.

He knew something was wrong when he saw the door of the garage ajar. The early-morning leaden sky gave him just enough light to see the almost smoothed-out indentations in the night's freshly fallen snow. The barrel of the Yale lock had been punched out with expert neatness.

He pulled the door open against the snow layering the fore-court and regarded the wreck of his car. His set face showed none of the pain the impact of her death had given him. Whoever had inflicted the sadistically brutal damage had enjoyed doing it.

She rested on the cement floor on distorted slashed tyres and exposed metal rims. Paint-stripper fluid poured lavishly over the enamel of the roof and flanks had boiled large blisters like first-degree burns in the polished tomato-red skin. The windscreen wipers and radio aerial were bent and twisted in grotesque curlicues. The bonnet cover, still propped open, showed the engine as a nightmare of ripped wires and cables with the battery casing ruptured, its spilled acid corroding rubber and steel. Bolt-cutters had been used on the copper tubing of the fuel system and hydraulics. Powdered cement was visible on the uncapped radiator and oil filler tube.

Inside, black paint had been splashed over sliced leather upholstery. Stuffing protruded from it like the intestines of a gutted animal. The cutters had been used on the wiring harness behind the instrument panel.

Dodson checked and found a sprinkling of sand beneath the petrol filler cap. Whoever it was had been thorough, not missing anything of importance.

He thought of all the callous bastards evilly-disposed towards him, trying without success to put a name to the one possessing the courage and viciousness to do it. He wasn't the only policeman to suffer vicariously the violence of anonymous revenge, to experience its frustrating outrage.

Stopping his anger, he returned to his rooms and dialled the Headquarters number, speaking first to De Mora and then to the Scenes of Crime Department. His car would be photographed in detail and painstakingly dusted with mercury grey and graphite black powders to develop latent finger impressions. He knew before they started that they would find only his own and, possibly, those of the odd petrol station attendant or two. Any man with the *nous* to come armed with bolt-cutters, paint and acid, equipped with sand and cement and a metal punch; wasn't anyone likely to overlook the elementary precaution of wearing gloves. What Dodson didn't want in particular was to

wait around while the post-mortem work was being done For it *was* post-mortem

He knew he would never drive her again

He still made his desk by nine-fifteen and was fingering through a small pile of photo-copied Descriptive Forms left for him when De Mora entered the office

De Mora never wore anything to the office but the dark grey suits and white shirts suitable to the image-making sobriety of the dedicated career man Outside, he seldom lacked the hat he wore to lift in salute to senior officers A sandy-haired pale-faced man, burning inside with his ambition, he exacted a like punctiliousness from those components below him on the hierarchical totem pole He and Dodson were each the antithesis of the other

He waited, his silence forcing Dodson to stand for his first disciplined acknowledgement of the day. Then he jerked his thumb ceilingwards 'Upstairs straight away, sergeant,' he said. If he felt any commiseration either about Dodson's car or his impending rocket it was adequately concealed 'Mr Ferris wants to see you'

Dodson didn't give De Mora the pleasure of showing any concern He waited pointedly until the inspector left the office, then shuffled the Descriptive Forms together and put them in a drawer in his desk, locking it against the possibility of De Mora's later interest in them and checking

Detective Chief Superintendent Basil Ferris kept him standing on the green square of officially-issued Axminster carpet in front of his desk, near enough for him to smell the morning's aftershave lotion and to see the sheen of talc on the older man's jowls Normally Ferris would push a chair forward with his foot and offer a cigarette That he didn't now went with the unfriendliness of his slate-grey eyes

He was a £4,500 a year executive with a Detective & Plain Clothes Allowance of £300 and seven pence for every one of the yearly 6,000-odd miles he would drive his car on CID business Even after a financial savaging by the Department of Inland Revenue, it allowed him to dress his lean wiriness in the elegance of Doimeuil waisted jackets and narrow trousers, Louis Philippe shirts with four-inch cuffs and high collars and monogrammed neckties. His bony hawkish face and the contrived shagginess of his cream-coloured hair gave him the arrogance of an ageing Afghan Hound. He was a hard, tough-cored man with sharp edges who had fought his quota of drunks and hooligans in the city's streets before promotion and middle-age marked him down for non-combatant duties and gave his administration of the Department a cautious self-interest

He had been smoking a cigarette in the black and gold holder

he affected. He laid it carefully on the lip of an ashtray and gave the full regard of his chilling eyes to Dodson

'I'm sorry to hear about your car, sergeant You've no idea who did it?'

'None, sir. But I'll find out' There was utter confidence in Dodson's voice

'I'm sure you will Your insurance covers it?'

'It does I suppose until I start reading the tail-end clauses on the policy I haven't checked yet'

'Well any help you want We don't stand for villains waging personal vendettas' He paused for significance 'Or policemen, sergeant, for that matter' He underlined his words by turning down the corners of his mouth. 'I run a team in this Department At least,' he amended, 'that was my impression'

Dodson waited stolidly, wanting to say *Get on with it Don't play around with me while I'm standing here with my back aching* He was in no mood for the verbal drawn-out minuet of a precisely phrased bollicking by Ferris.

'I don't deny you did—within its limits—a reasonably good job, sergeant. You arrested Hooper, caught him actually on the job Which was good' He hooked the fingers of one hand in front of him and examined the nails

Then the eyes came up again. 'But you lost his accomplice Which was damned bad'

He looked at his fuming cigarette, wishing he could smoke it He was doing the disciplinary reprimanding early so he could report it as a *fait accompli* to the Deputy Chief Constable at the ten o'clock conference When told of Dodson's dereliction the Deputy would look at the wall and say 'Um' and then tell the wall that he wanted this man given a bloody good roasting And Ferris disliked being told to do what was already his intention

'With respect, sir,' Dodson defended himself, 'you're oversimplifying it, I could have lost both by the time I reached a telephone . . .'

'Oh? I'm to assume you were without a radio?'

De Mora had already made this undeniable breach in his defence and he remained silent. Ferris obviously knew it and wasn't asking a question

'Aren't they issued for that precise reason?' Ferris was at his magisterial worst now 'Or has Detective Sergeant Dodson been exempted from complying with Force Standing Orders?'

'I'm sorry . . .'

'No you're damned well not,' Ferris snapped 'You're just making noises.' Dodson's very stolidity was scratching at his never very equable temper He smacked the flat of his palm on the desk in an excess of irritability for he liked the big sergeant, knowing

him to stand head and shoulders above the other men as a thief-taker

As he stood before him now, Ferris took in the bulky heftiness of him, his unyielding stolidity. He wore a suit of his usual patternless brown and it hung on him as gracelessly as an elephant's skin. Behind the non-communication of the face, Ferris thought he looked strained and tired with deep lines running from the nostrils to the corners of the unsmiling mouth.

'For Jesus Christ's sake, sergeant, this isn't the first time!' Ferris bored on. 'Instructions are instructions and I'm bloody tired of having to excuse your ignoring them to the Deputy Chief.'

'Sir'

'Just a minute.' He wagged a silencing finger at Dodson. 'There's a time for talking, sergeant, and a time for listening. This is the time for listening. For *you* to listen and for *me* to talk. There's no room in my department for a freebooter. No room for a grandstander, a glory hunter.'

Dodson broke off the regard between them, looking through one of the windows at the snow-covered roofs outside. Despite his external phlegm, he was simmering inside. There had been an edge of contempt to the Chief Superintendent's words.

Dull red patches appeared over Ferris's cheekbones. 'Are you listening to me, sergeant?'

Dodson looked at him again, this time with anger showing in his eyes for a brief second. 'You were saying something about glory-hunting.' The 'sir' was pointedly absent.

Ferris breathed heavily. 'You damned well know what I mean. It's teamwork I want. Good honest co-operation and liaison. That's what counts in the long run. Anything else is bloody-minded incompetence. Or don't you agree?' He waited, giving Dodson an opportunity to comment. When he remained silent, he continued. 'What we don't need is individual, undisciplined skirmishing. No matter how brilliant or inspired it may appear to you.'

Dodson didn't agree with him about that either and remained blank-faced and unreadable.

Ferris, banging his head against Dodson's obduracy, was growing more angry. And, paradoxically, more quiet with it. But it could be a dangerous quietness. He said carefully, 'You aren't the only CID man working the Crotch.'

'No, I'm not.'

'And I wouldn't want you to think that because you've been working it since Before Christ, you'll necessarily go on working it until you're pensioned off.'

'I don't. In fact I should be happy to move any time the Chief Constable thinks fit.' That, he thought, should set Ferris back on

his custom-built shoe heels The Chief Constable wasn't going to move Dodson or anybody else from the unpopular Crotch without a better reason than their arresting one prisoner instead of two He wouldn't see it in quite the same way as his Detective Chief Superintendent

Ferris knew it too and back-pedalled his way to safety while he had the opportunity, before Dodson offered to submit his own application for a transfer from the Department 'That,' he said, very smoothly for a man who was swallowing his own black bile, 'isn't what any of us want All we want, sergeant, is that you should conform to procedures One of these days you're going to get your backside shot off digging into trouble on your own .'

'Yes, sir' Dodson wanted the interview over, feeling suddenly tired of it all, the thought of Ursula's problems uppermost in his mind He was prepared to eat an ounce or two of dirt to give Ferris the moral victory he needed just to have the inquisitorial reprimand terminated He said woodenly, 'I'm sorry I didn't take my Pocketfone with me Next time I'll do so and call for assistance when I consider it necessary'

He was saying empty words and both knew it But they served well enough for a truce

Ferris retrieved his cigarette. Nearly an inch of grey ash hung on it He tapped it into the ashtray 'Good,' he said briskly, inhaling smoke, 'Orderly Room interview now over So let's forget it, eh?' He really thought that a subordinate on the wrong end of a disciplinary tongue-lashing could do so But the resentment behind the mask of Dodson's face still smouldered, all the more because he knew that Ferris—from his standpoint—was right

Ferris continued 'What about Hooper's accomplice? You think you'll have any luck?'

'I'll find him' Again he made it a simple statement of fact, a complete confidence in his ability to do so 'I'll know him when I see him'

'Good man It'll be expected upstairs' What he meant was, *You'd better if you wish to expiate your crime* He reached for a folder, ending the interview 'Keep me in the picture.'

A Message Form addressed to him awaited Dodson on his desk
1007 hrs/ A Mr Bradley telephoned at 1000 hrs/ Will wait at 23281X until 1030 hrs/ C S Sw Op

He checked his wristwatch He had five minutes in which to decide whether he should let Bradley wait for nothing But he knew his free choice was as limited as the room for manoeuvre he had been given And that, as he saw it, was non-existent He felt a belittling contempt for himself, for his inability to deal effectively with Bradley

He dialled the number he recognized by its terminal letter as being that of a public kiosk

Bradley answered Hearing his voice—soft and polite—Dodson experienced a recurrence of his loathing for the man He could visualize the bright brown eyes seeking for something from him

'Thank you for calling, Harry,' Bradley said 'I knew you wouldn't let me down'

Dodson kept his voice level 'I know It was considerate of me' He waited, then said, 'All right Say what you have to say'

'You've spoken to your sis to Mrs Stephens?'

'Where are you calling from?'

Bradley tutted mockingly 'As if you didn't know from the number, my dear boy A kiosk, naturally And a very smelly damp one at that' He spoke as if he had discovered ordure on his fingers 'You'll no doubt check exactly where if you haven't done so already But you were going to answer my question about Mrs Stephens'

'I spoke to her' The words came out reluctantly, sticking in his windpipe like gobbets of wire wool 'I'm prepared to speak to you

'That's friendly of you, Harry I appreciate that very much'

'Everything but kiss your ass, Bradley,' he said tightly 'Don't push me too far'

'I'm not pushing you at all, Harry,' Bradley said mildly. 'Particularly not over a telephone you may be having tapped' He laughed 'You see what a suspicious mind I have I'd even bet that you've done a check on me at the Criminal Record Office'

'I told you to say what you have to say, Bradley I'm in no mood for playing games.'

'I'm sorry, old man I really am Will you lunch with me?'

'No'

'Harry' Bradley was gently insistent 'I really would like you to Please don't spoil our brand-new friendship by being churlish'

Dodson thought that one out Baulking at eating with Bradley wasn't likely to advance his own interests Getting close to him might 'You're insisting,' he said, not asking, just saying

'It's not a word I like used between friends, Harry I would appreciate it if you would'

'I can't make lunch. I'm much too tied up with a remand at court'

'Dinner then? This evening?'

'Yes'

'Say eight o'clock at the Royal Fountain?'

'I'll be there'

'Oh, Harry!'

'Yes?'

'I really would prefer you to call me Wilfred'

'I'll give it a lot of thought, Bradley' He replaced the receiver and gnawed at a piece of skin on his thumb for some moments Bradley was becoming a pukingly familiar part of his life, a man he hadn't known twelve hours ago yet who had now attached himself to it like a slimy leech and was drawing blood

He took a typist's pad from a drawer of his desk and made a record of his two conversations with Bradley and the details of the call he had made to Scotland Yard Then he finished checking through the Descriptive Forms

There were a number of Wilfred Bradleys with differing middle names but having in common an average age of fifty years, four Robert Samses and a couple of thirty-five-year-old Luckhursts None of the photographs resembled either Bradley or Sams Neither of the Luckhursts had been anything approaching a petroleum engineer although their backgrounds seemed sufficiently well-documented to include it had they been

He bundled the lot back in the drawer together with the pad, turning the key on them

Before leaving for court to give evidence of his arrest of Hooper and to oppose bail, he telephoned Ursula While he waited for the connection he thought about her. He had always considered her a misfit as a WRAF officer, knowing her to be as feckless and scatterbrained as she was attractive And always a sitting bird for the moustached, sports-car-owning type of predatory male with a good line in sophisticated chatting-up He had always thanked God she had had the sense to marry Bill who possessed none of the flamboyancies which had attracted her in the past. Now he wasn't so sure he had much to be grateful for It would be a tragedy for Bill to discover his adored Ursula was another man's wife. And Bill was a man Dodson would do a lot to protect

When she answered, he said, 'Everything all right, Ursula?'

'I didn't sleep' She sounded washed out; as colourless as her hair

'That made two of us Bill hasn't noticed?'

'He knows something is wrong But I said I had a migraine Has . . . has anything else happened?'

'No I want more details from you It's convenient? Bill's not there?'

'It's convenient, Harry'

'What part of England did Luckhurst come from?'

'Lancashire . . . I think He used to talk of Manchester And he had a slight North Country accent'

'His education?'

'Cambridge Trinity Hall A small school beforehand Is it Bulstrode's College School? Near Manchester?'

'I wouldn't know I've never heard of it Look,' he said, 'I've two sets of records here about men called Luckhurst I can't identify them without either checking their body markings or having you look at the photographs Can you recall any characteristic marks that might help?'

'I don't know,' she said faintly

'Come on,' he ordered her impatiently Suddenly everything seemed to be pressing him down to futile despair 'Don't be so bloody coy about it You must have looked at him with his trousers off Did he have any moles or marks on his belly? An appendix scar?'

'No, Harry He really had nothing obvious '

'You'd have seen it,'

'Yes, I'd have seen it,' she whispered

'I'll send the two photographs Will you look at them and let me know straight away?'

'But Bill . . '

'I'll enclose them in an ordinary brotherly letter addressed to you You can fiddle the photographs out without Bill knowing Is there anything else you remember about Luckhurst?'

'He was a drilling engineer . . but you know that already.'

'Tell me something about him you didn't include in your statement '

'I can't really recollect what I did say, Harry. I met him in Kuwait proper—the town I was stationed at an RAF Staging Post at Muharraq on Bahrain I went to Kuwait on leave. He was working there at a small place called Umm Qusr . . '

That irritated him. 'It's what you said in your statement.'

'I'm sorry, Harry,' she said miserably 'I'm trying to be helpful'

'Did you ever see documents? Those about his work?'

'He had a brief-case of papers I've seen the letter and memo headings of his firm British Petroleum And he told me quite acceptable details about what he did His firm was connected with the American Gulf Oil Corporation in a joint concession and he knew a lot of Americans But,' she said helplessly, 'I don't remember names and things after all this time I was working in Muharraq he spent most of the time at Umm Qusr We used to meet and stay at the Al-Nakub Hotel in Kuwait'

'So what really caused the break-up?' He wasn't prepared to accept her written statement at its face value

'He he walked out on me After five weeks Please Harry, it's it's not anything I want to talk about'

'Perhaps not But you're going to have to' He wasn't overly sympathetic 'Husbands don't usually walk off just because their wives get pregnant Even two-faced bastards need more of a reason than that'

Oh, Harry' Her voice faltered 'Something that makes it even worse When I told him about the baby' She stopped and he could hear her moist breathing

He said, 'After five', then stopped himself That would be rubbing it in 'No more than that?'

'Yes From before we married'

'Did he dispute the situation?'

She hesitated 'He said it couldn't be his'

'But it was?' He was all brother now, protector of the family females

'Yes I was stunned, Harry He shouted at me called me foul names' She was brimming tears 'Oh, Harry,' she moaned 'Don't make me remember I'd almost made myself forget'

'I need the whole picture' He was remorseless with her 'Anyway, if he wanted an excuse, he had it And if not that, it would have been something else' He was hating Luckhurst as much as he hated Bradley As stupid as Ursula might be, she was still his sister 'Why didn't you tell me about getting married?'

'I suspected I was pregnant, Harry You'd have worked it out I was going to tell you when it didn't matter'

That wouldn't have surprised him They had never been very close anyway Not after their parents had died, leaving them no common link He said, 'I assume Luckhurst didn't know either Not until afterwards until you were married?'

'No'

'H'm' He didn't see why Luckhurst shouldn't have been told of her suspicions But he didn't understand women and there was nothing he could say in answer that wouldn't be hurtful 'I take it you don't know where he went?'

'No'

'Does Muscat mean anything to you?'

'It's about six hundred miles east of Bahrain'

'That's where he's supposed to have gone'

'I didn't know I went to Umm Qusr when he didn't come back to the hotel I saw the Chief Engineer there but he hadn't seen James for a couple of days Which was how long he'd been with me.'

'What else?'

'I telephoned the company's office in Kuwait They weren't very helpful They said they had no record of our marriage He was still listed as a single man That hurt me as much as anything He'd just left them too He'd been in some company

trouble I think That was all, Harry I was so horribly humiliated my service career finished well, you know what happened'

'Yes' He let the painful silence drag for a few moments while he tried to think of something to say about it There was nothing He started again 'You've remembered the date of his birth'

'No, I'm sorry'

'It's necessary for me to check records to see if he does this sort of thing as a hobby The record of marriage says "over twenty-one" Which isn't very helpful'

'I wish I could help, Harry'

'Did you ever see his passport?'

'Yes'

'Did you notice where it was issued? London? Newport? Liverpool?'

'No' She was definite 'I wouldn't have noticed Harry! What are you going to do?'

'First of all make sure Bradley keeps quiet Then find Luckhurst'

'Oh! *Please*, Harry, don't let him know about me . where I am

'Don't talk such bloody nonsense, Ursula' He knew she was chewing her lip She always had done under stress He didn't tell her that Luckhurst probably knew already That possibility seemed not to have occurred to her 'Am I likely to tell him? I've to find him first With any luck,' he said, meaning every word of it, 'I'll find the bastard dead and scattered over a garden of remembrance'

CHAPTER FIVE

HOOPER, despite the closely-reasoned but fallacious arguments of his solicitor, Mulready, had been refused bail by the magistrates. Symes the pawnbroker, exuding an almost visible aura of bewildered innocence, had been allowed it

Dodson, returning satisfied to Headquarters, had spent an hour in the Scenes of Crime Department with the operator of the Photo-fit Facial Identification kit, fitting together segments of features, trying to arrive at a composite that would approximate the remembered face of Hooper's confederate The finished mock-up—Dodson's unconscious antipathy to the unknown man had given the synthetic features a brutish, animal awareness—had been photographed and would be included in the next Daily Crime Circular for the information of the force

He had scribbled a short letter of brotherly platitudes to Ursula, enclosing the photographs of the two Luckhursts he had scissored from the copy Descriptive Forms

He spent the afternoon in the Crotch, pressing his informants into activity, squirrelling the few fragments of doubtful information they disgorged either too readily—and therefore suspect—or reluctantly under the fear of offending him. But neither with the second man nor with the wrecker of his car did he make any progress

Before the time of his meeting Bradley he returned to his rooms to shower, the hot needle spray scouring the dirt of the Crotch from his body. Nothing could remove the overcast of depression from his mind. His features had been set into a mould of worry and simmering anger

His apartment was little more than a convenient way-station he used as a place in which to hang his suits and shirts, a place in which to fall gratefully into the bed he had himself made before leaving in the morning and a sure and certain source of solitude. A solitude that was rarely a loneliness. On the few occasions when he was neither working nor sleeping, he read. He had reached *Eusebius of Caesarea* in Volume 8 of the Fourteenth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which he possessed, intending eventually with a single-minded determination to have covered the readable twenty-three volumes of what he considered the sum of human knowledge. He read slowly and intermittently, not understanding much of it but ploughing on doggedly, conscientiously

He ate out more than in but kept a small stock of cans and bottles in his pantry for those occasions when he finished too late to find an open restaurant. A woman came in on Saturdays and spent a frustrating and sweaty three hours clearing up the previous six days' unnoticed dust and debris of his living.

Bradley was alone in the crowded bar drinking a sherry when Dodson arrived. He had removed his British Warm and was executively flash in a dark blue suit with wide stripes and over-blown lapels. He still wore the same purple and green tie. A folded *Evening Echo* and his pipe lay on the counter before him. His face reacted at once, friendly and welcoming, his eyes bright with the sheen of oil slick.

'Harry!' There was a seemingly unfeigned pleasure in his voice and Dodson, warming instinctively to the greeting, felt a momentary doubt about Bradley's real motives

It wasn't difficult for his reason to expunge the doubt and he took the extended gloved hand, shaking it coldly, unsmiling

'How nice to see you, Harry'

'Yes.' Dodson was back in possession of his old paradoxically

comfortable belief that Bradley was a 24-carat uncomplicated bastard, a chocolate-covered piece of dung Which he preferred, always having found it easier and less confusing to deal with an all-black uncompromising villainy than one owing to an admixture of virtue

Bradley flicked a finger and thumb at the bartender 'A sherry?' 'Thank you' He managed to say it, not very graciously and conscious that Bradley's civilized amiability made his own responses appear boorish He wished he could find the detachment enabling him to react with a contrived urbanity 'A dry one'

Bradley smiled approvingly 'I hope you won't mind, Harry, but to save time I've ordered dinner I'm afraid it seems to be the usual hotel scoff with not too much of an alternative'

'It'll do, whatever it is,' Dodson said indifferently He watched the bartender pour his sherry in silence, taking it and sipping at it without salutation

Bradley drew him to the end of the bar, holding his arm with soft fingers, away from the other drinkers Dodson shrugged the unwelcome touch off

'Dear me, Harry, you aren't yourself today' He regarded the detective with his head cocked sideways, beaming slyness in his eyes 'You haven't yet told me to get stuffed'

'Give me time I probably will' He didn't respond to Bradley's raillery 'Where's the hired thug?'

'You mean Mr Sams?'

'Yes' Not conscious of it himself, his jaw muscles were bunching and Bradley noticed

'That I didn't bring him indicates the degree of my trust, Harry' He showed mock concern 'I'm not going to need him, am I?'

'I was interested in his background,' Dodson said, holding Bradley with a steady gaze 'He wouldn't have been in the car-wrecking business, would he?'

Bradley's face was guileless and unworried and didn't fool Dodson for a moment 'I don't understand, Harry Is that a joke?'

'Not a very funny one My car was given a going-over with a pair of bolt-cutters during the night'

'I see' He twisted the sherry glass between his gloved fingers 'I hope you don't think I had anything to do with it, my dear chap'

Dodson's flat eyes expressed what he didn't bother to say in words

'Perhaps,' Bradley offered helpfully, 'you've been name-calling somebody And they didn't like it' His smile was tight-lipped as he said it 'It could have been no more than a minor resentment at the law's incivility Only my own interpretation of it, you understand I have noticed—if you'll pardon my saying so—that you have a certain bluntness of speech that people might resent.'

Car-wrecking, I'm told,' Dodson said, smiling in his turn, a gelid microsecond of a smile, 'is an extremely dangerous occupation with a high mortality risk I thought I'd mention that also.'

That's better, Dodson, he told himself. A bit of Machiavellian indirectness is necessary with this smooth-faced sod I called him a crook and he didn't like it Subtlety wasn't his line of country but he'd try it

He drained his sherry and caught the bartender's attention, holding up two fingers

'I don't think I'd like another, Harry, thank you' Bradley had been unmoved by Dodson's ambiguous warning, his friendly amiability still with him

The detective's adopted indirectness fled the bar He scowled 'I don't give a damn whether you want one or not' He put coins on the counter 'Leave it if you don't'

Very noble, Harry No obligations, eh? A drink-for-drink independence' He was mocking him gently, creasing his eyelids together with humour

'That's exactly it' He collected his change, then said, 'Are we eating? This bar isn't the best place for blackmailing me Somebody might hear you'

Bradley squeezed Dodson's arm again with soft fingers that held gently like affectionate slugs 'I appreciate a man who can be considerate and thoughtful It's a good philosophy, Harry'

Seated at their table, Bradley said, 'Excuse me,' and delved into an inside pocket, producing a small flat grey plastic box with dials and switches He stood it on the newspaper he had brought with him to the table and pulled a stubby aerial from its interior He depressed a switch and a tiny ruby light glowed

A very ingenious piece of mechanism, Harry A sonic pulsator or oscillator I believe it's called Mr Sams tells me it wipes sound from tape by electro-magnetic impulses Or,' he said, wrinkling his forehead, 'does it distort the oxide particles on the tape track? I'm not sure. He explained it all to me but it's a bit outside my particular field'

Dodson interrupted him sharply 'You believe I'm taping our conversation? Isn't that something more in your line?'

'I didn't think you would, Harry, but Mr Sams insisted' He looked apologetic 'I suppose it would be a natural reaction were you to do so and I wouldn't blame you But I'm afraid Mr Sams hasn't my implicit trust in you' He took the box from the table and placed it on the floor beneath his chair 'We don't want the management thinking we're listening to a transistor radio, do we? It might not be allowed'

'You're wasting your time and its batteries'

'I know, my dear chap, but allow me to leave it on It's a

situation similar to where a country is suspected of possessing too many ICBM's. So a second country, feeling threatened, builds some anti-ICBM's. Then the first one has to checkmate with anti-anti-ICBM's.' He smiled encouragingly. 'I expect your Research and Planning Department will come up with something very brilliant about an anti-pulsator mechanism so don't feel too depressed.' He was anxious. 'You're not offended by my frankness, Harry?'

Dodson dismissed the gadgetry with a flap of his hand. 'I'm thinking about this Sams thug of yours,' he said. 'He knows you are trying to blackmail me? And the reasons?'

Bradley winced. 'Harry! My dear chap! You continue to be so terribly blunt. No, Mr Sams thinks—suspects, really—that you and I have a mutually profitable arrangement. I'm afraid I allowed him to believe that you owed rather more money to a bookmaker than you could afford, that you were unable to pay off and that I had bought a piece of you. You know? As you can with a racehorse. Or a boxer. There's enough plausibility in it to keep Mr Sams quiet. He's a sweet man but not a very original thinker. He leaned forward, his eyes solicitous. 'You don't really mind his thinking you bent? Much better, Harry, than knowing the truth. I thought your sister's situation too intimate a secret to share. Don't you agree?'

Dodson's words came from wooden lips but he made them casual. 'You nasty little sod! You should be in politics.' The scar on his forehead was livid. 'A dirty lying pump!'

There were a few moments of silence between them with cutlery clashing in the background. Then Bradley managed a smile. 'You really should be careful with your language, dear boy. I expect it was something similar you said that got your car wrecked.'

'I've only one car, Bradley,' he said through closed teeth, not casual any more. 'Only one sister. You have only one life. You know that you can get yourself killed? That policemen can be pushed to killing somebody as easily as other people? It's a blackmailer's occupational hazard, Bradley,' he warned him grimly.

'I'm perfectly aware of it, Harry. But my death would, I'm afraid, leave too many loose ends for your peace of mind. Like your sister. tcha! Why are we getting so dramatic?' He stopped as the waiter approached, remaining silent while the soup was poured. It resembled green pond algae with globules of yellow fat floating on its surface.

Dodson took a spoonful. It tasted as unpleasant as it looked. He said, 'I'll skip this,' pointedly ignoring Bradley's last remarks. He tried the wine. If he had cared to label it, he would have

called it good strong stuff. Qualified, he thought, as being particularly useful for topping up car batteries. He lit a cigarette, watching Bradley sombrely.

Bradley, having poured a little of his wine into it, ate his soup with the same amiable zest he was using in suborning Dodson. He chewed it as if biting lumps from it.

'What precisely,' Dodson said to him, 'do you propose blackmailing me into doing? Or not doing? Oi,' he added with a sour smile, 'isn't it the sort of thing you like discussed with your soup?'

Bradley put his spoon down. 'I think you've misjudged it, Harry. It isn't, I admit, *potage crème de petits pois*. But then, it isn't tinned chemicals either.' His eyes were slyly humorous at this goading of Dodson. 'First of all, I'm going to try and do something for you. Something to prove my sincerity. And prove my ability, if you wish.' He unfolded the newspaper, holding it at arm's length and screwing his eyes as he looked for what he wanted. 'Ah! Here it is. *Local Man Remanded in Custody*.' He dropped the paper in front of the detective's soup plate. 'It's about poor Hooper's arrest last night, Harry.' His regard was alert and Dodson noticed he missed little of what was going on in the dining-room.

He lifted the paper and read the item which had been outlined in red ball-pen ink.

Edward William Hooper, a 25-year-old steel erector of 17(a) Weeder Lane, appeared before the City Central Magistrates' Court this morning charged with Aggravated Burglary by entering the premises of Leonard Symes, pawnbroker, Marine Street, the previous evening and stealing, while armed, the sum of £3,240 from a safe and was remanded in custody for seven days. Det. Sergeant H. Dodson of HQ Division, giving evidence of arrest, told the magistrates that further inquiries were being made with a view to effecting the arrest of a second man concerned in the offence with Hooper and the recovery of more than £1,500 still outstanding. An application for bail by the accused's solicitor, Mr G. Mulready, was refused.

Dodson looked up from the newspaper, palpable belittlement on his mouth. 'And you want me to fix things for him? A bloody fixer,' he growled contemptuously, looking as if he were about to spit. 'The lowest of the low.' He tossed the newspaper back at Bradley. 'Not only can't I do anything, I'm not even going to try.'

'I assure you that you're mistaken, Harry. I want to give you Hooper's confederate as a token of my esteem.' He bobbed his head. 'A mutual esteem, I hope.' He waited expectantly, his soup spoon poised.

Dodson was astonished and showed it. Then he frowned. 'You're

joking 'The man was a blob of infuriating quick-silver, never staying motionless long enough to hold a point

'But I'm not,' he protested 'I honestly am not' He smoothed his chin, stroking an invisible beard 'I never joke about money.'

'Ah!'

'It has always seemed wrong to me, Harry, that our society has never really rationalized its attitudes to the payment of a reward for information leading to a villain's arrest' He flapped an admonitory hand at Dodson's attempt to speak 'A minute, my dear fellow. I know what you're going to say Informants' hand-outs, insurance companies' rewards for property recovered, and so on The big deal, Harry' He rubbed the pads of his forefinger and thumb together, making a faint slithery greedy sound like the rustle of unmarked notes 'I mean money for men, bounties . '

'Forget it,' Dodson said decisively 'There's no reward for Hooper's accomplice Possibly twenty-five pounds from the Informants' Fund And I assume you wouldn't be interested in that'

'No, I wouldn't,' Bradley admitted cheerfully

Dodson indicated the newspaper 'Much too fortuitous, Bradley You probably wouldn't have known about Hooper until this evening'

'I didn't But I know now I had another prospect lined up for you earlier but he'll keep'

'For Christ's sake, Bradley, stop being so bloody devious Say what you want from me Come to the point' Dodson's face was dark with irritation

'Ah!' He waited while the waiter removed the plates When he had gone, he said, 'If you are happy about the need to protect your sister's good name, Harry, then I'll be very much to the point. You are happy?'

'I've a choice?'

Bradley smiled gently 'You would know if you had, Harry'

'So don't waste time then I'm willing to listen to you' They were still hard words for Dodson to utter 'That I'm doing so now should be enough'

Bradley nodded his satisfaction with a mandarin-like bobbing of the head 'That pleases me, Harry It may surprise you to learn that in my own peculiar way I'm a supporter of law and order'

'It does,' Dodson said harshly 'I had you tagged as a black-mailer'

Bradley sighed 'Your one other failing, if I may say so, Harry, seems to be one of inflexibility Give,' he urged, 'just a little If it helps you to rationalize your conscience, I'll agree you aren't a willing volunteer, that you've listened to me under duress So, if you've a need to retain your rather sensitive morality intact you

have every justification for doing so I'm not without admiration for stainless incorruptibility Just so long as it doesn't rub off on to me'

Warmed-up lamb chops were placed in front of them by the waiter with a pretentious flourish meant to disguise their inadequacy, and vegetables served from a hot-plate trolley Their marked lack of interest in the food unsettled the waiter and he tumbled, earning a scowl from Dodson

'Um' Bradley regarded the food doubtfully 'You might have warned me, Harry This is my first dining here'

I hope it poisons you You were buttering me up about my conscience when we were interrupted' There was a dark and implacable hostility about Dodson that would have subdued and chilled a less ebullient man than the self-possessed Bradley

'I suppose I was, Harry But it was genuinely meant' He looked up from cutting meat and creased his eyelids with goodwill 'You're sure you couldn't try calling me Wilfred?'

Dodson didn't answer He wasn't hungry for the Royal Fountain's version of lamb chops and he lit another cigarette not caring that Bradley was eating

'Dear me, Harry, what an obdurate man you are Do you know anything about Robber-flies?'

Robber-flies?' he echoed blankly, caught off balance again

'Yes The *Asilidae*, to be correct in nomenclature A yellow and black fly, Harry It preys on other flies Even bees and wasps It has a spike on its nose which it sticks into them and sucks their juices'

'So?'

'Well, these Robber-flies have other flies parasitic on *them* Ichneumon-flies to be exact Tiny little things of no apparent account but very deadly for all that'

Go on You aren't telling me all this for fun'

'No, I'm not Is it a relatively easy step for you to equate Robber-flies with human villains, *Homo sapiens criminalis*?'

'You're about as subtle as a stab in the back But I don't stretch the analogy as far as ichneumon-flies'

Bradley pointed his fork inwards at his own chest 'Try me for size, Harry Although you shouldn't take it so far as to attribute to me the ichneumon's personal characteristics'

Dodson stared at him, astonished again 'You can't be serious!'

'But I *am*, my dear chap So tell me, would parasitizing a known villain be so reprehensible? Would that raise your so-prickly hackles?'

'The law makes no distinction between those who are the victims of crime' *Christ!* he thought, *he's making me sound pompous now* 'Stealing from a criminal doesn't make the steal-

ing less dishonest. Anyway,' he said, not unhappily, 'let me tell you this too. You'll finish up getting your throat cut. Or your belly stamped on.' He showed his teeth. 'There's something about that, Bradley, that makes the possibility seem almost attractive. In fact, you appear to be going out of your way to attract trouble.'

Bradley looked completely unruffled. He had been fragmenting a chop with the precision of a dissecting pathologist and he laid his knife down. 'No man ever earned a tax-free income without taking some little risk.' He regarded the detective speculatively. 'But with Detective Sergeant Harry Dodson as a friend.' He lifted his wineglass, squinting through it against the light, then sipping it appreciatively and smacking his lips. 'Who needs a three-o'clock-in-the-morning courage for that, Harry?'

'You're a fool, Bradley. Either that or mad.'

'I'm neither. But, I thought, probably original.' He leaned forward, projecting earnestness. 'It would serve both our purposes, Harry. Mine the rewards, yours the glory.'

Dodson looked at him sharply. It was the second time that day the word had been used. 'What do you mean, "glory"?'

You would have the villain.'

'There's no glory in that,' he said flatly. 'No more than is in catching a rat in a trap. You seem pretty sure, Bradley. Are you turning in one of your own men?'

Bradley regarded him quizzically. 'That isn't a very nice suggestion. I wouldn't do that unless I was forced to.'

'You mean unless it showed a profit?'

Exactly, Harry. I'm glad we understand one another.'

And your reward for turning in Hooper's accomplice?'

'I'm assuming that without his booty he'd still be acceptable as a prisoner?'

You're asking me?'

'Not really. I'm *saying*.' Bradley's eyes were hard although his features remained gently amiable. 'I've manured the ground pretty thoroughly with hard cash, Harry. Now I want some of it back. It's reasonable I should collect my profit. After all,' he pointed out, 'you get paid for doing much the same thing.'

Dodson stared at him in the heavy silence that followed, taking in every wrinkle and pore of the face's landscape, the polished chestnut eyes, the small colourless mouth, the smooth graining of the closely-shaven skin, the pink neck-flesh overhanging the tight grey-check shirt collar. His hatred was all the greater because here was a man who, in different circumstances, he could have liked and admired. He felt as if he had survived the wolves only to fall victim to the unexpected bite of a mannerly dachshund.

hund. He knew he was shying away from the crux of Bradley's demands. And doing so deliberately, wanting to concern himself only with the arrest of Hooper's accomplice, knowing as little as he need of Bradley's reasons, his intentions 'You really think you'll turn him up?' In one way he could make it a warming thought Ferris's accusations still rankled.

Bradley shrugged 'Unless you get there first, Harry. In which case I shall have to revert to my original choice. The one I had in mind before I read of your interest in Hooper's friend. You know, these villains are incredibly stupid beneath their cunning. I get so much information about their activities that it's staggering they survive so long as they do.'

'They do because there's a little matter you seem to overlook. Sufficient evidence to convince a jury they did whatever it is they are being stupid about.' He was putting Bradley in the class of bloody fools who thought they knew otherwise. In Dodson's experience they came by the hundred.

'But that's not my concern, Harry, is it? Only to hand the body over.' He smiled but there was an underlying sharkishness about it that reminded Dodson again not to take the cherubic bonhomie too much for granted. The greed that showed naked was ruthless.

'You know what you're asking me to do?' The detective mashed his cigarette on the rim of the plate containing his cooling meal and Bradley grimaced.

'To be helpful co-operative. That isn't so much, Harry, is it?'

'Your "isn't so much" is called Corrupt and Improper Practice in the police service, Bradley. Regulation seven of *The Police Discipline Regulations*—'—he parodied Bradley's own words—
'to be correct in my nomenclature.'

'I thought perhaps the lesser transgression of improperly disclosing information,' Bradley said blandly. 'I imagine it happens every day in your relations with the newspaper people. A not very serious matter and something I'm sure you could bear up under.'

'Like I could with leprosy.'

'If you set it,' Bradley continued, ignoring the interruption, 'against the undoubted benefits society would derive from your arrests.'

'You seem to know more than is usual for a layman about Police Regulations.'

'A little, Harry.' He made a deprecatory *moue* with his lips. 'One gets around, uses a library, picks up useful information. Research and reconnaissance, my boy. Never take a step in the dark if you can borrow somebody's torch.'

'You're a persistent bastard, Bradley' He lit a fresh cigarette, sucking the smoke into his lungs He needed nicotine more than he did food

Bradley waved a diffident hand 'Not as persistent as I could wish or I'd be a rich man It's one of the least regarded of the virtues Yet it makes politicians into statesmen and thick-headed soldiers into successful generals' He added unctuously as if quoting a secondhand opinion he didn't wholly approve, 'I'm also told it achieves things with women'

'If you've nothing else to say

'But I have, Harry And, incidentally, I have the feeling you are not quite so antagonistic towards me'

'Don't fool yourself,' Dodson said harshly 'And remember there's a limit Go over it and I'll smash you, legally or illegally Even if it means smashing myself and my sister in the process'

'Fair enough, dear boy,' Bradley replied, lifting his eyebrows but with friendly agreement in his voice 'I'll stay within limits'

'How long am I going to have you on my back?'

'Not long, Harry One of the things I've learned—from other people's misfortunes, I should add—is not to hang around the hive after you've tapped it for honey' He was earnest again, leaning forward, dabbing his forefinger on the tablecloth 'I really mean it, old son.'

'You'd better Anything would be better than too much of you'

'If you say so, Harry' He suddenly became brisk. 'Well, so far it's been all talk I'd like to leave it at that stage for now until I can give you Hooper's friend'

'I'll believe it when I have him in a cell'

'But first' Bradley withdrew a small black notebook from inside his jacket He licked the ball of his thumb and turned a few pages. 'Ah, here you are, Harry Don't think me immodest but I'd like to show you have you at least acknowledge the thoroughness of my research And, perhaps, have you correct me if my information is less than accurate' He was very schoolmasterish in the way he said it Dodson thought him a pedantic little sod in addition to his already-held opinion of him

Bradley read it out to him *'Harry John Dodson, born Wonersh, Surrey, 10th May 1941 Educated Guildford Grammar School. Enlisted police service in June 1962; appointed Detective Constable 1967, promoted Detective Sergeant 1969 Congratulations, Harry, that was good going Unmarried. Rents three-roomed apartment at 26 Godolphin Grove for which he pays £45 a month No visitors during period of observation but a Mrs Gladys Butler spends three hours in apartment on Saturday mornings, leaving at twelve noon with a bundle believed to contain clothing for laundering. Owns a 1968 Ford Zephyr saloon, red, index BOR210X which he keeps in*

a lock-up garage at the rear of the apartments' Bradley beamed 'There's a lot more, Harry. Trivial stuff about which bars you use, times of leaving your office and suchlike'

'Including the shape and depth of my navel, I suppose?' Despite his being shaken at knowing he was the subject of a detailed dossier, he showed contemptuous disparagement 'A boy scout could get all that crap by following me around, watching me for a few days, no doubt buying Mrs Butler a couple of gins It doesn't impress me'

Small things, Harry, make up the whole man It cost me fifty pounds-worth of private inquiry agent Some of them will do anything for money Even watch policemen

'What you mean is that you thought you might get something else to hang on me A stream of married women calling, staying overnight'

'Please, Harry, you really do misunderstand me A normal reconnaissance Nothing more Is your apartment on the telephone? It's reported you have one but I can't find it listed in the directory'

'It's unlisted'

'I'd like it, Harry. Please It won't always be desirable for me to telephone your office'

Dodson hesitated, then gave it to him 'You've finished with me? For the moment?'

'If you put it like that, yes' He was tamping tobacco into the bowl of his pipe with a brown-tipped gloved finger 'You should be comforted,' he said, indicating the orange-bowled pipe 'A little colourful but the symbol of solid, respectable *bourgeoisie* Trust me, Harry When you work it all out you'll come to the conclusion I'm a lot less dangerous—and infinitely more useful—than even a well-briefed and organized informant You still call them narks?'

The detective stood and took a wallet from his pocket He slid out two notes and put them on the table, placing a peppermill on them 'That should cover my end of the bill,' he said

Bradley shrugged his shoulders 'I was expecting you to be my guest, Harry. However, I do—I really do—understand how you feel' He flicked the notes from under the peppermill. 'I'll let you have the change.' He was amused 'But you're an anachronism, my dear boy. Morally-inhibited and smelling like a nun. Trying to protect a society that doesn't give a damn, doesn't worry about its safety half as much as you That isn't worth protecting'

'Sophistry, Bradley What matters is that I worry'

Bradley sighed, 'There isn't much compromise in you either'

'No, there isn't And what were you, Bradley, before you turned sociologist and cheap blackmailer?'

A faint flush pinked Bradley's cheekbones and his eyes were suddenly angry. He had been in the process of lighting his pipe

and he stopped, holding the burning match poised. Then, without answering, he continued his deep steady puffing.

Dodson laughed scornfully, jeering at him. 'You don't like being called what you are, do you? Was it the "cheap" that got under your skin? You've got some pride, Bradley—God knows why you should—and men with pride are vulnerable.' He was putting his overcoat on. He had come to terms with the other man but they didn't include concealing his dislike for him or being polite. 'You were right in what you told Sams. You've bought a bit of me. But only a bit, Bradley. And it's the bit you haven't bought you should worry about.'

It wasn't much but when the only satisfying alternative was bloody violence, it was something.

CHAPTER SIX

STEPPING OUT into the brightly-lit street he shivered, turning up the collar of his coat against the wind that cut like a cold knife. Fat snowflakes were falling and beginning to whiten the roofs of cars lining the street. He had parked his borrowed car at the rear of the hotel and he left it there, moving along the busy pavement and crossing over under cover of passing traffic. He turned into the first lane leading from the street and worked his way back to a point opposite the Royal Fountain, choosing a narrow passageway from which he could watch for Bradley's departure. He stood motionless, his gloved hands burrowed in his pockets, invisible in the dark shadows of the shoulder-wide opening, sandwiched between blank brick walls pressing in on him. He twisted his head to take in a brief survey of the passage behind him where, after a few yards of total blackness, it widened into back areas littered with overfilled dustbins and scattered rubbish.

He felt uneasy, a sixth sense prodding at his subconscious for attention, insisting on the presence of a watching intelligence. It could, he knew, be something as harmless as a waiting cat for he had experienced this feline telepathic probing of his mind before. He cursed his lack of a torch, considering moving away from the passage but seeing no other place where he would not be exposed to Bradley's immediate discovery. Snow floated into the narrow opening, settling on the shoulders of his coat and speckling his hair. Occasionally he stamped his feet in the dirty slush he stood in, keeping them from freezing.

When Bradley appeared in the cone of light illuminating the bar entrance, wearing his British Warm and muffled at the throat, Dodson stepped back into the deeper shadows. A muscular forearm whipped iron-hard around his throat and fingers dug into the

biceps of his left arm, preventing his twisting around to face his assailant. He felt himself pulled further back into the passageway, his feet scrabbling in the slush. He smelt the ammoniacal sharpness of embrocation. There was a moist breathing in his ear and Sams's low voice 'Easy does it, copper, or I'll twist your head off. Mr Bradley wouldn't like to think you were going to follow him.'

Dodson held his body motionless, the brutal intimacy of the man's grasp an outrage to him. He compressed the muscles of his throat against the unrelenting constriction. Sams patently knew little about wrestling holds but the situation needed thinking out. If he jerked Sams over his head in a flying mare—and he could easily—the bruiser would finish sprawled out in the High Street, one of the more certain ways of attracting a passing constable's unwelcome attention that Dodson could imagine.

He slipped the glove from his right hand and, reaching up almost casually, gripped and levered one of the fingers clamped on his biceps into the trap of his closing fist. He did it neatly and powerfully before Sams realized what he was doing.

'Aaaagh!' Sams grunted and the leverage on the detective's throat tightened. But he did it too late. Dodson had dug the point of his chin in behind the arm, taking some of the crushing pressure from his windpipe.

He put the strength of his wrist against the finger he held, forcing it backwards. It bent like whalebone and Dodson knew it must be shooting fireworks of agony up Sams's arm. 'It's your finger against my head, friend,' he wheezed into the muffling cloth of the sleeve. He smiled his savagery, seeing in Sams a release for the frustrations of his impotent submission to Bradley.

There was no sound in the passage but that of their laboured breathing and the rasp of the canvas fabric of Sams's stormcoat straining in the violent embrace. Then, with what to Dodson seemed an eternity of hours, the throttling grip around his neck relaxed and he turned gradually to face the crew-cut Sams, leaning heavily on the imprisoned finger, half hoping it would snap yet fearful of losing the advantage the drawn-out pain was giving him. Sams withdrew his arm, his hooked fingers hovering in front of Dodson's grim face before letting it drop helplessly to his side.

All was pain for him now as the detective forced him inexorably to his knees. The pale eyes were agonized, his mouth thin-lipped and twisted in a *risus sardonicus*. Despite the frigidness of the night, a greasy sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead. But he was as tough and durable as seasoned leather. Where another man would have screamed at the grinding agony of the doubled-back finger he groaned his distress behind clenched teeth, fighting Dodson as much in a trial of resolution as physically.

Dodson held him there, maintaining his pressure. In a way,

Sams was being used as a surrogate sufferer for Bradley. And for the detective, it was satisfying to be doing something and not being used. 'The next move,' he whispered at the upturned face, 'is my knee into your teeth.'

Sams's eyes were injected with suffering but he shook his head dumbly. He wasn't giving Dodson best yet.

Dodson twisted the finger, maintaining his backward pressure. 'What were you trying to do, Sams? Give me a good going-over?' He grinned. He needed no *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to teach him anything on the physical plane.

Sams shook his head again. 'Mr Bradley said no agh! no violence *Christ!*' He writhed, groaning. 'You're killing me, you bastard.'

'It's an idea.' He was thinking of his wrecked car. He wished he knew and not just suspected. 'Was Bradley having me followed?'

'Balls to

Dodson tweaked on the finger, chopping off his curses. 'Answer me,' he snapped.

Sams wagged his head stubbornly. Then he looked back over his shoulder, calling out urgently, '*Stan! Stan!*'

There was movement at the end of the passage and the sound of unhurried footsteps. A big man stood behind Sams, the mercury-vapour light from the street giving his features a leprous blue patina, shadowing the eye sockets, the nostrils of his bony nose and the loose, insolent letter-box mouth. His hair was the lank ochre of bleached seaweed. What Dodson saw of him he immediately disliked. He possessed all the earmarks of a man who would choose to spend his yearly holiday as a stand-in slaughterman at an abattoir. He stood there, his yellow eyes glittering on Dodson, taking in the situation and not letting it worry him.

'You've got 'old of a right bleedin' terror there, Bob.' There was amusement in his voice. 'What do you want me to do?'

Dodson tightened his fist and Sams hissed his suffering, beating his clenched hand impotently on his thighs. 'Go on,' the detective said. 'Tell him.' He looked hard at the newcomer. There wasn't much he could do to help Sams. The narrowness of the passageway allowed him only the opportunity of reaching Dodson over his friend's interposing body.

'Who are you?' Dodson demanded.

The man held up a protesting hand. Dodson wouldn't have been surprised to see brass knuckles on it. 'Don't worry, mate. I ain't interferin'. Jus' askin' if you'd let 'im go like. An' let me look after 'im.'

Bradley had gone and Dodson could see no profit in spending any more of his time in forcing Sams's finger back off its hinge. Particularly not with the blond-haired man posing a threat if

he got round to thinking about re-entering the passageway from Dodson's end. But the disengaging was likely to be dangerous. Sams's scar tissue and deformed ears made him a fighter. He wouldn't be short on brute courage and, with his finger released, could be a formidable opponent even with only one uninjured hand. Dodson didn't believe he would want to use the other for a few days. The blond man, despite his assurances to the contrary and given the opportunity, would be only too likely to interfere.

'Move,' Dodson growled. He pulled on the finger and stepped backwards. Sams, forced to follow, shuffled along on his knees in the slush like a dwarfish monster, dragged by the inexorable pain, his eyes hating his tormentor. On reaching the entrance to the street with only his back visible to passers-by, Dodson halted. Then suddenly, his face cruel, he slashed the back of his free hand against Sams's jaw, feeling the teeth hard against his gloved knuckles, the head jolting sideways. Sams put his hand to his mouth, then looked at the smear of blood on it as if unable to believe what he saw.

'I told you before about putting your dirty paws on me, Sams,' Dodson said, releasing the finger. 'Consider that a down-payment on my car.' He imagined he saw a flicker of recognition and a tightening of the jaw muscles that might have meant something.

Surprisingly, the kneeling man stayed where he was, nursing his maltreated finger, his eyes flaying Dodson inch by painful inch. Then he bared his bloody teeth and whispered up to him. All his built-in menace was contained in the way he spoke. 'Only because Mr Bradley said so, Dodson. There'll be another time.'

'You!' Dodson said authoritatively to the man behind Sams. 'What's your name?'

The yellow stare was insolent. 'You'd better ask Mr Bradley, mate. I'm like you—I only work for 'im.'

There was a silence between them, broken only by Sams grunting as he straightened himself to an upright position.

Dodson's whole aggressive disposition cried out to hit the man, to hammer the shaming knowing insult back between his teeth. But, because what he said was true, his anger turned inwards on himself, leaving a shrivelling impotence. Even with Ursula's future left out of his reckoning, the time had long gone when he could take Bradley's approach and threats to Ferris; to be able to explain satisfactorily his delay in doing so. He had already stumbled, chloroformed by concern for his sister, past the point of no return.

He turned away, his face set, the T-shaped scar livid on his forehead. He shook with a terrible black sickness. *You bloody bitch!* he swore silently at the distant Ursula. *You bloody stupid selfish bitch!*

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE TALL THIN MAN with the appearance of a shabby-respectable accountant entered the yard at the rear of Police Headquarters with the purposive air of going somewhere with a clear-cut mission in his mind. The yard, crammed to claustrophobic suffocation with parked cars and racked bicycles, was made a woebegone shabbiness of scraps of dirty snow and strewn boiler ashes by the sun shining on it from a cold enamel-blue sky. Two forlorn dogs, padlocked in a row of chickenwire cages, howled to an uncaring world that they were lost. The man, incongruous in a black old-fashioned homburg hat and a velvet-collared blue coat, picked his way through the cars to the steps leading to a high platform designed to facilitate the unloading of prisoners from the rear of the Black Maria directly into the Charge Room.

The Charge Room, smelling of floor polish and office-cleaner's sweat, was unoccupied as he walked through it and along a passage. None of the men he passed asked him who he was or what he wanted. He was the Unnoticed Man, the man who acted as if he were entitled to be where he was and therefore accepted as belonging. Without hesitating, he climbed the chipped concrete stairs, polished to a glossy metallic grey from a century's wear by the tread of policemen's heavy boots. There was a warm smell of frying bacon and hot fat rising from the basement canteen.

Reaching the first floor, he paused before a swing door with a black-painted board screwed to it. It read, in oxidized gold-leaf letters, CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION DEPT OFFICIAL ENTRY ONLY. The man pulled his hat further down over his forehead and pushed the door open, noting it squeaked on unoiled hinges, entering the long corridor behind. Traversing the linoleumed length, he heard snatches of telephone conversations from behind the doors flanking it. Men passed him carrying documents or brief-cases. None gave him a second look. He read the door tablets as he passed along: DETECTIVE CHIEF INSPECTOR, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR, dropping progressively in rank to DETECTIVE CONSTABLES (GENERAL OFFICE).

He sought and found a partly-opened door marked DETECTIVE SERGEANT with *H J Dodson* printed in ink on a white card pinned beneath it. He knocked on it twice before an impatient voice called out 'Yes?', allowing him to walk in.

Dodson, a telephone receiver held against his ear, was making notes on a yellow scratch pad. He frowned and said 'Hold on, please' into the mouthpiece, putting the palm of his hand over

it 'You're looking for someone?' he asked the man His expression clearly showed it needn't be him

'Yes You, Mr Dodson' His voice was soft and the sort that would try hard not to drop the aitches

'Oh?' He didn't know the man 'You called at the Inquiry Office Desk?'

'I thought it better not to '

'And I think it better you should,' Dodson said curtly 'I'm busy'

He waited for him to go

'Please, Mr Dodson I don't mind waiting It's very important'

Dodson measured him with his flat level gaze, then spoke into the telephone 'Sorry, Jimmie, I'll have to call you back Something's come up' He recradled the receiver thoughtfully He suspected Bradley's finger in his visitor's unannounced arrival Was this Luckhurst? If he was he looked as unlike a petroleum engineer or a womanizer as Dodson had ever imagined He nodded at a chair 'Sit down' He took a deep breath 'You said you had something important'

The man sat, removing the hat and placing it foursquare in the mathematical centre of his pressed-together thighs Before speaking, he looked around the office with a mild curiosity, noting the yellowed painted walls wiped of dust with a wet cloth by ladderless cleaners only to head height and papered with typed lists of detective duties, court agenda and out-of-date crime figures A thin blue-grey layer cloud of cigarette smoke hung motionless above Dodson's head

'My name's Joseph Tull, Mr Dodson I've come to ask a favour'

Dodson frowned The name meant nothing to him 'A favour? You mean this is the something that's important?'

Yes But important to you too, I think'

Dodson took in the navy-blue velvet collar of the coat, the well-laundered white shirt and the dark maroon tie with the too-small knot The face went with it Mild horse's eyes behind the silver-rimmed spectacles hung on his long twisted nose gave him an earnest clerical appearance The creases around his eyelids and nostrils and the denture he showed said he was well into his thirties It gave him, Dodson thought, the camouflage needed by a man for whom it was politic to appear inoffensive Which could mean he might be dangerous the type to shoot a man out of his chair with a gun concealed in a folded copy of *The Christian Endeavour*

'Tell me,' Dodson said 'How did you get past the Inquiry Desk?'

'I came in the back way Nobody seemed to object' He smiled

ingratiatingly 'What I have to say to you doesn't concern your Inquiry Desk, Mr Dodson Nor do I want to be seen here'

'All right, Mr Tull,' Dodson growled irritably He still wasn't sure about the man 'Come to the point and make it short, please'

First of all I've some form behind me My CRO number is 9372/64

Dodson had rapidly scribbled the information on his scratch pad 'A minute,' he said He depressed a red switch on a console at his side A voice answered, 'Crime Records' The detective read out the name and number given to him by his visitor 'Do an immediate check at CRO for me and pass it back I'll be waiting' He spoke to Tull 'Carry on'

Tull pulled a folded very clean white handkerchief from his breast pocket and coughed delicately into it, examining the result and frowning as if disappointed it wasn't blood 'I've been married two years, Mr Dodson, and my wife and I are extremely happy' He emphasized the last words by spacing them out

'I'm glad' Dodson couldn't quite disguise the sarcasm in his voice and he offered Tull a cigarette in amends

Tull shook his head 'No, thank you I don't smoke' He made it sound as if Dodson shouldn't either He waited while the detective did his ritualized drill of lighting one 'Anyway,' Tull continued, 'to the point as you said Beryl—my wife, that is—knows nothing of my record' He indicated the console 'You'll find when they reply that I've got convictions for unlawful sexual intercourse and similar'

'H'm' Dodson knew sexual offences to be the nadir of a villain's form and never anything useful as a character reference in the underworld 'You should try tying a knot in it'

Tull fingered the stickpin in his tie, pursing his lips in disapproval at Dodson's advice 'I'm afraid it's a medical thing, Mr Dodson But obviously not the sort of form I'd want my wife to know about I'm a builders' merchant's clerk now and I want to stay one Beryl'—he swallowed—'Beryl would leave me if she knew'

'You know her best So who's going to tell her?'

'The police'

Dodson frowned 'You'd better explain that And be careful how you do so'

'Oh,' he said hastily 'Not in the way you think I promised to teach Beryl to drive my car Daft of me, really I never got around to applying for a licence for her and was fool enough to let her have a go in one of the back streets near our place No L-plates, of course'

'You don't need them if you drive unlicensed' Tull was beginning to bore him He looked at his wristwatch pointedly

'Oh? I didn't know' His face was mournful and he coughed into his handkerchief again 'While we were crawling along in bottom gear, a panda car came round the corner' He shook his head 'I said "Oh, dear me!" or something similar and Beryl panicked. put her foot on the accelerator instead of the clutch' He looked incredulous 'Out of all the thousands of cars in the city she had to run into somebody's gatepost in front of that one And one driven by a diabolical bloke who hates my guts'

Dodson kept his face expressionless but wanting to tell Tull to bugger off, to take his stick without crying about it 'There's one in everybody's life,' he said shortly

'This one's definitely in mine, Mr Dodson When he got out of the panda to speak to us, Beryl reversed to get back on to the road and ran the rear wheel over his foot So he booked her for no driver's licence and for careless driving And me for aiding and abetting'

'So?'

I'm asking a favour—a special favour, Mr Dodson' He looked supplicatingly at the detective 'Can you get me off the hook?'

'You've got a bloody nerve, friend . ' The console buzzed and he stretched an arm and fingered down the switch 'Yes?'

The remote voice said, 'The record of Joseph Francis Tull, sergeant Alias "Flasher Joe", CRO number 9372/64 Convicted of the Unlawful Carnal Knowledge of a fourteen-year-old girl at the Lewes Assizes in June 1964 and a Probation Order made for two years Three summary convictions at the Bow Street and Croydon Magistrates' Courts for indecently exposing his person to females—small girls again Fines in each case, the breach of his Probation Order of 1964 not proceeded with Convicted of burglary at the City of London Quarter Sessions in December 1966 and fined £100 You want his antecedents?'

'Not now Put a note of them in my box will you' He flicked the switch up, returning his attention to Tull and eyeing him with stiff distaste Small girls He imagined he was now sublimating his medical disability with the woman he had married 'You forgot about the burglary,' he said ironically

Tull shrugged, in no position to resent Dodson's contempt 'A mistake, Mr Dodson I never thought of it'

'Why don't I know you?'

'I moved here only a year ago' He said it as if apologizing for the detective's not knowing

'H'm I was saying you had a bloody nerve'

'I need to,' he said simply. 'I'm in trouble'

'You're frightened your form will be given at the hearing?'

'It's bound to be The bloke who pinched me will see to that'

'So would I if you'd run your car over my foot But why come

to me? I don't know you and don't know that I'd do anything if I did. It's a Traffic Branch matter anyway.'

Tull swallowed air. 'You know Billy Hann?'

Dodson kept his expression wooden, concealing his surprise. What detective didn't know Hann? Not only was he the biggest receiver of stolen property in the city but, Dodson suspected, also doubling as a Crime Squad informant, eliminating opposition gang rivals and personal *bêtes noires* by turning them in as opportunity allowed. He dealt only with top brass villains and gave his information only to top brass squad detectives. He handled high grade merchandise such as gold bullion, silver plate and industrial diamonds. He was not too proud to own to an obsessive interest in cut-price currency. But anything valuable and exportable was jam on his bread. He used the docks as a kind of personal exporting agency, shipping diamonds to Amsterdam, gold to Colombia, tractors to East Germany and plundered art treasures to New York. Despite his unquestioned value to the Crime Squad, his informing bought him no protection. His warehouse outside the dock area had been turned over half a dozen times, his own house nearly as many. But at no time had he been found in guilty possession of identifiable stolen goods. He survived only by his utter ruthlessness and the support of the nasty specimens of mindless brutishness he called his business associates. They were an affront to a society that didn't care enough to insist on their elimination.

Dodson's fists curled at the thought of Hann. He had hungered for years to put his fingers in the receiver's collar but had never been within light years of doing so. He had the special savour of having the aura of being the Crime Squad's own particular pigeon for the plucking should he ever fall. And plucking him on his own would please Dodson as much as anything he could imagine.

'I've heard of him,' he admitted cautiously. 'But how about you? You said you'd been here only a year.'

'I knew him in the smoke, Mr Dodson.'

'You've been lucky since 1966 then? Not being clobbered for your medical condition.'

'I've been straight.' He glanced nervously at the closed door. 'I can trust you.'

Dodson stared at him. 'My saying you can doesn't mean a thing and you know it. You wouldn't have sneaked in here and found me if you didn't think you could.' He picked up a pen as if in dismissal. 'If you've any doubts, friend, the door's behind you. Close it on your way out.'

'I'm going on what other people say.'

Dodson waited.

'I'm dead meat, Mr Dodson, if Billy ever finds out I've grassed on him'

'Oh? You're grassing on him then?'

'You get me off the hook and I'll give you Billy'

'That's been promised before'

'I mean it, Mr Dodson You know where he lives?'

'Of course' Hann owned a large pseudo-Tudor house in the heated swimming pool, two-car garage belt of the city, owning to more silver birch trees and rhododendron bushes than the next

'He keeps his best stuff there The really hot loot Your people have walked all over it and never tumbled'

'Yes,' Dodson agreed sardonically 'We're an inefficient lot of bastards But we seem not to have done too badly with you Tell me more'

Tull swallowed again 'The lounge,' he said 'It's been excavated underneath There's a trapdoor beneath the carpet'

'You know? Or you're guessing?'

'I know, Mr Dodson I made the trapdoor myself several years back I laid the carpet too It's a wall-to-wall You have to pull it out from under the telly and roll it back Billy and his mob laugh themselves sick at your people when they do a search, walking all over it'

'I can imagine You worked with Hann?'

Tull hesitated, his Adam's-apple bobbing 'I used to do his books And odd jobs like carpentering that had to be done by someone he could trust'

'And you've helped stash away loot in your time?' Dodson had no illusions about Tull or anybody like him

Tull didn't choose to deny or confirm that 'I'm in a very dangerous position, Mr Dodson You'll have to find the trapdoor like it's by accident or I'm sure to be fingered for grassing'

'It could be managed What's in this Aladdin's Cave of Hann's?'

'Nothing worth your sweat at the moment You'll have to wait on the word to move in'

'From you?'

'From . . . a bloke called Charlie who'll telephone you' He fidgeted, fingering the brim of his hat nervously. 'It's not that I don't trust the Squad boys, Mr Dodson,' he said carefully, his anxiety to avoid giving offence transparent, 'but no secret's a secret when it's shared'

He had obviously heard of Hann's connection with them and it suited Dodson's purpose 'Fair enough. I'll keep it to myself until I get the call'

'Thank you You can guess what he keeps there?'

'Enough to put him away?'

'Mr Dodson, he'd never come out again' Tull's eyes were

suddenly greedy 'There's talk of a job that'll pay off in platinum bars, Canadian dollars . . '

'Builder's clerk or not, friend, you don't seem to have lost your contacts'

'No You only do that when you die Or when they do'

That, Dodson knew, was a fact 'If I square this traffic thing and then you cross me up, you'd better catch a train somewhere. You know that?'

Tull nodded 'I'm in it now, Mr Dodson I won't cross you'

'All right You'll know in a couple of days if I can get you a caution'

'And Beryl my wife?'

'No' Dodson was definite 'She isn't part of the deal If she's fined for running over a policeman's foot it's only what she deserves' He cocked his head 'You aren't asking for any money?'

Tull stiffened, his expression pained 'That wouldn't be honest, Mr Dodson There's a difference' He stood 'I'd better go' He sounded as if already regretting telling Dodson anything He offered his hand and the detective, reaching over his row of law books, shook it It was damp and soft like a mildewed fungus and he wondered briefly what Beryl thought of it

'I'm sure you'll be able to find your own way out,' he said ironically Then he shot the question at him suddenly, 'How are Bradley and Sams today?'

Tull looked blankly at him There was nothing in his eyes suggesting a recognition of the names

'Who?' he asked

'Nobody if you don't know them A couple of friends of mine'

With Tull gone, he lit another cigarette and thought the proposition out to a logical conclusion It didn't include reporting it to De Mora who would feel obliged to tell his immediate senior, Detective Chief Inspector Fowler who, in his turn, would pass it on to Ferris And by Ferris to the Crime Squad Commander Too many things could go wrong And if they did, Tull's fears were not exaggerated If he was fingered by Hann it would be painful and very probably final It wasn't that Dodson distrusted the squad men But, like the villains they hunted, they would often talk too much Dodson felt bloody-minded in any event It was a deal and a good one and it was his A motoring caution exchanged for the heaven-sent opportunity of clobbering Billy Hann, of wiping the too-knowing sneer from his unpleasant face.

He lifted the telephone receiver and dialled an internal extension number, speaking to the Sergeant-Clerk in the Traffic Chief Superintendent's office He told him enough to ensure that the report of Tull's traffic offences would be settled by a written

caution but not enough to excite official curiosity. Hann's was a name to be kept under cover until he chose to use it.

He made a call to the Provincial Police Crime Branch at Scotland Yard, asking for inquiries to be made at the Head Office of British Petroleum for a background check on Luckhurst and at the Passport Office in Petty France to trace the issue of a passport to him. Then he telephoned the Cambridge CID, requesting an information check on him at Trinity Hall College.

He entered none of the messages in his official record of checkable telephone calls but listed them on the pad he kept in his locked drawer. So far, nothing he had done could be rationalized as acceptable routine.

Nor could his visit to the Scenes of Crime Department where he improperly borrowed the Photofit kit and returned with it to his office.

He placed the plastic frame of it on the blotting pad in front of him with an open crime file at his elbow ready to cover it in the event of a visitor entering his office. He fitted the small wooden case of face sections in an open drawer on the blind side of the office door. First he flipped through the cards of eye patterns, choosing a medium-sized pair possessing, he judged, the alert brightness he sought. Finding and clipping in a suitable forehead and hair style and then adding a narrow-nostrilled nose, he had the top half of a projection of Bradley's features. He had more difficulty with the mouth, worrying his visual memory to reproduce its likeness, eventually selecting one both thin-lipped and short in width. The chin was undistinctive and easier to suit. He overlapped them in the frame and pushed them together for the shortened facial balance required to recreate Bradley's round features.

He examined the completed composite without enthusiasm. It was as near the superficial Bradley as he would ever get by assembling the organs and appendages of other men's faces. But he didn't think it represented the real Bradley. He swivelled his desk lamp over the frame and switched it on, photographing the face with a tiny Minolta camera. Assuming Bradley could be wearing a hairpiece, he removed the top section of the head and substituted a bald scalp for the hairy one. Recalling Bradley's shortsighted peering at the newspaper, he added the transparency of a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. Bradley was now a different, a more cherubic-looking man and one, Dodson guessed, more likely to be recognized by his mother. If, he thought, the bastard ever had one.

He photographed that frame too. The film would have to be developed and printed with the same secrecy he was forced to employ in all his inquiries about Bradley and Luckhurst. Ferris,

should he discover what was going on, would never leave it at a mere casual inquiry of its purpose. He would bring all the considerable weight of his rank to bear on Dodson until he either gave or broke.

Finally, he dialled the number of the local hospital, asking to be put through to the Pathological Laboratory. He spoke to Doctor Prickett, the man he sought.

'Peter,' he said, 'I've a prospective client who says he suffers from psoriasis something or other and wears cotton gloves to prove it. I think he might be conning me. Can you fill me in on it?'

'A minute, Harry.'

Dodson heard the thump of the receiver on Prickett's desk and then the sounds of pages being flicked over.

'Ah! gloves you say? Let me see, there's intertriginous psoriasis, universal psoriasis, psoriasis of the nails, pustular psoriasis

That's it, Peter. The last one.'

'I see. Prickett was obviously reading from the book 'Occurs on palms and soles—which may explain the gloves—red scaly areas of yellow pustules—you've seen them?'

No. But I've seen his wrists. They're quite clear. Does that indicate anything?'

'It could do,' Prickett said cautiously. 'You really need a specialist in dermatology, Harry. You coppers seem to think we pathologists are walking text books.'

Yes, we do,' Dodson said unsympathetically. 'So tell me how to find out, Peter.'

'Have you smelt him?'

'Yes. Mainly triple strength Mountain Lion deodorant.'

'I mean, is there a smell of an ointment, a germicide?'

'If there is, it doesn't survive the deodorant.'

'I'm sorry, Harry. I can't be more specific but I'd say that if his wrists are clear of pustules and there are no others visible, it's unlikely he has pustular psoriasis or any other psoriasis. You've shaken hands with him?'

'Yes.'

'No wincing? No signs of tenderness or itching?'

'Not that I've noticed. And I would.'

'Then it's possible he's having you on. You'd know why?'

'I could guess. I think he's been fingerprinted at some time or another and doesn't want me lifting his dabs from stuff he's been handling.'

'He sounds a cunning little sod.'

'He's all of that, Peter.' Dodson hadn't doubted it right from the first time of meeting Bradley.

Apprehension was a solid weight on his shoulders. He wrapped a woollen scarf around his throat and pulled on his overcoat, checking his possession of his handcuffs, a full packet of Gitanes cigarettes and his lighter.

For probably the first time in his life he felt lonely and unhappy, not being able to imagine what it was like to feel otherwise. He was being manipulated. And Dodson knew that once manipulators found a crack in a man's skin big enough to insert a dirty finger they worked at it until the whole fist was inside, drawing out the guts inch by inch.

Outside in the bitter night his breath condensed into silver candyfloss vapour. A frozen moon and stars glittered in the black hole of space. Ice splintered under his feet and he slapped his gloved hands together. The town was quiet and Dodson could imagine the vast impersonal breathing of its wrapped-up sleeping, only a few policemen and locked-out cats moving in the streets.

He had left his borrowed car in the forecourt and he found it rimmed with frost, the metal a burning cold through his glove as he opened its door. It was reluctant to start and the engine caught only on the last spark of the exhausted battery.

He entered the deserted length of Penkhull Street moving slowly, the engine almost noiseless as he coasted down it. Lights shone through orange curtains above an ironmonger's shop and he stopped the car before reaching it, walking the remaining few yards to check the number. A door at the side of the shop had 47 in aluminium numerals screwed to it and he remained outside, listening. The silence was absolute and he pushed the door inwards, entering the tiny hall. A flight of uncarpeted stairs rose in front of him into total blackness. He shone the beam of his torch upwards to a door at the top. He trod the stairs carefully, keeping his feet near the skirting to avoid noise. Reaching the door he stood motionless, listening with his ear against it. Then, impatient of caution, he grasped the handle and turned it, flinging the door open.

A young tow-haired, olive-skinned man sat slumped in a wooden chair in the centre of the room, his wrists and ankles tethered to it by cord. Even with the sock tied brutally between his open jaws, Dodson recognized him as Hooper's accomplice. And there was an answering recognition in the eyes that rolled helplessly at him. One was discoloured with a bluish watery bladder beneath it. His jacket had been pulled down over his arms and his shirt ripped from one shoulder. A rough pad of cottonwool was fastened to it by a strip of surgical tape. Blood had dried on the flesh of the arm and on the shirt. Blackened

spots of it stained the orange and brown carpet which had been ruckled in ripples of violence. One of the man's shoes was off, the foot bare of the sock used to gag him. At his feet lay a miniature electric drill, a cable running from it to a power socket in the wall. The slender drill bit sticking from its nose like a needle was dark with blood.

Dodson's heart sank, the muscles in his jaws bunching. He smelt disaster. Without moving, he took in the chaos of the room. Despite the stained wallpaper and discoloured ceiling, it was a woman's room and expensively furnished. With, he guessed, the liberality of other people's money. Now it was a shambles of ripped velvet upholstery and eviscerated cushions. Drawers from a sideboard had been pulled out and their contents untidily emptied on to the carpet, bottles of whisky, gin and brandy tumbled with them. An opened bottle of brandy stood on the sideboard but no glasses. The bright red television set had been tipped over on its face with the backboard torn off, exposing the tubes and wires. Dodson saw in the room the same sort of brutal enjoyment in destruction with which his car had been wrecked.

He stiffened. A muffled voice, straining through cloth, came from inside the open door leading from the room. He strode past the man in the chair and looked through the door, blinking his eyes and adjusting them to the darkness. A figure lay on a bed, writhing and gabbling angry unintelligible words. His hand searched the wall for a switch and found it. The woman, naked from the waist downwards, was dressed only in a gold-coloured pyjama jacket. Her wrists and ankles had been trussed like the man's, her mouth gagged with a towel.

He threw a fold of the bedcover over the white flesh of her legs and loins, then untied the knot in the towel. Her pink lipstick had been smeared over her mouth and mixed with the blood coming from her bottom lip. Her teeth chattered with cold. Tears had dried on the sides of her nose.

Through stiff lips she mumbled, 'If you're the bloody law, you took long enough to get here.'

'We always do.' He took out his pocket-knife and pulled back the bedcover from her feet, slicing the cord binding her ankles. Then he released her wrists.

'Judas!' she muttered, sitting up and rubbing her ankles. My bloody legs. She was a big-breasted woman whose pyjama jacket was clearly inadequate at concealing them.

'Cover yourself,' Dodson said, 'and get dressed. I'll want to talk to you.'

He returned to the man. There was nothing about him indicating he was seriously injured and Dodson cut through the sock dividing his face in two. He worked his jaws and groaned, spitting

on the carpet 'Aren't you going to untie me?' he asked thickly 'I need a doctor' He looked mean and vicious

Dodson pulled away one end of the tape on his arm, lifting the pad of cottonwool There was a small bloody hole in the muscle of his shoulder joint He replaced the pad and the man winced. 'Careful, you clumsy bastard!'

'Who did it?' An electric fire had been disconnected to use the drill and Dodson replaced it, switching it on It was cold in the room

The man shook his head 'I don't know Two bastards with stockings over their faces' He groaned again He was still finding it difficult to use his tongue and he wagged it between his teeth 'When I opened the door one of them plastered me one, knocking me arse over tit Then he held a shooter on me and tied me up' He was still disorganized and dazed

A gun! Torture! Dodson's dismay didn't show but it was acute The trouble he had anticipated was on him like a dark cloud, shadowing his thoughts

The man said, 'What about Lil?'

'If she's the woman in the bedroom, she's more or less all right You must have heard her thanking me,' he added ironically 'What's your name?'

He hesitated, looking down at his knees He was recovering rapidly 'James Smith'

'The right name Your friend Hooper's waiting for you to join him

He was silent for a moment Then, his attitude taken, he said, 'Bollocks'

Dodson twisted his fingers in the man's hair, forcing his head up Look at me when you're being bad-mannered, he said quietly 'I asked you your name'

'Christou, you bastard'

He accepted that He looked like a Cypriot 'You've form?'

Christou struggled against his bindings 'For Chrissakes get these things off me'

Dodson cut the cords securing his wrists to the chair, taking his handcuffs from his pocket and clipping them on him He checked the time with his watch 'You are under arrest for breaking and entering the premises of Symes of Marine Street,' he intoned formally, 'in company with Edward William Hooper and stealing a sum of money from his safe You aren't obliged to say anything unless you wish to do so but what you do say may be put into writing and given in evidence Now,' he said, 'the money Twelve hundred pounds Where is it?' He was sticking to routine drill Anything less would leave him open to immediate suspicion

'I don't know what you're talking about' Christou's speech came

easier now, his built-in resentment to any form of authority clear. He glowered his personal dislike of Dodson in particular.

'The money? Or Symes?'

'Both. I want my solicitor. And a doctor.'

'You've never seen me before in your life, I imagine?'

'No. I know you're a copper.' His bruised lips twisted. 'Coppers stink and I can smell you from here.'

Dodson was impervious to small insolences. 'I'm sure you can,' he said equably. 'What about these two men?'

'Pour me out a whisky. I don't feel well.'

'Wait until you see the doctor. He might think it bad for you.' Giving Christou alcohol would be seized on with relish by any reasonably competent defending solicitor—Mulready in this case, Dodson thought—and exploited without conscience or respect for justice both to undermine the detective's evidence and to smear him. He looked around. 'No telephone?'

'No.'

'I'll send your wife. She is your wife?'

'I'm not.'

He was interrupted by her entering the room. She had put on tan trousers and a thick vivid emerald polo-neck sweater that emphasized the fleshiness of her breasts. Fresh lipstick covered the cut on her lip. She was a physically attractive woman with a pale face and glossy straight black hair swinging over her cheeks. She needed to be slept with before she grew too fat, too used. But she did something to Dodson's breathing that other women had failed to do and he frowned.

She went straight to the electric fire. 'Judas!' she said, holding her fingers spreadeagled before its bars. She wore rings on more fingers than were bare of them. 'I'm bloody frozen.' She looked about her at the disorder and anger twisted her mouth. Then she saw the pad on Christou's arm. 'What did the bastards do to you?' she snapped.

'Keep it quiet,' he snarled. 'Don't you know the law's got his ears flapping?'

She glared at him, resentment flaring in her green eyes. 'Thank you very much. A bloody fine hero you turned out to be.' Her voice was shaking with indignation. 'Why didn't you tell them? The bastard screwed me rotten. All for a miserable.'

'SHUT UP!' Christou shouted at her. 'For Christ's sake belt up! He should have done it with the bloody drill.'

'Why didn't he tell them what?' Dodson asked her. Her perfume had reached his nostrils and it was strong, full-bodied stuff.

'Keep your fucking kisser closed,' Christou hissed at her venomously.

There was a clear-cut demarcation in Dodson's mind of imper-

missible words used with women Christou had used the worst one 'You shut up,' he snapped, 'or I'll stuff the sock back in your filthy mouth' To the woman, he said, 'I asked you what it was he didn't tell them'

But she was sullen now and her fear of Christou showed 'Nothing'

'They found the money?'

Christou and the woman exchanged glances 'We don't know what you're talking about,' he said at last

'It'll come,' the detective assured him easily But he knew it wouldn't and he had to hope it wouldn't Christou daren't admit he had ever had it It would have been damaging evidence against him Bradley knew his villains as thoroughly as Dodson did The potential danger was in either De Mora or Ferris interrogating Christou into an unexpected confession

'I want to know who the men were,' he said to Christou He was very conscious of the woman's eyes taking in the whole of him

'I told you, for Chrissake I don't know'

'You,' Dodson said to the woman 'You know them?'

She folded her arms around her body, still cold 'No The light was off'

'There's a telephone booth on the corner of the street Please get your coat on and go there Dial nine-nine-nine and tell whoever answers I want assistance Detective Sergeant Dodson And tell them to move I've a prisoner to take to Casualty for treatment'

'Do your own running about' She stooped and picked up a tumbler from the carpet, wiping the rim with the hem of her sweater and pouring whisky into it

He walked across to her, his face savage with spilled-over frustration, knocking the glass from her hand with a sweep of his big fist The whisky sprayed over the sideboard and on her trousers, the glass bouncing into the wall behind her He put his hand flat on her shoulder and pushed She was cushion-soft and pliant to his touch and staggered backwards, her face suddenly frightened

'Get your coat,' he growled

She glanced at Christou He was sallow-faced and nursing his shoulder with manacled hands 'Do what the man says, you stupid cow! Do I have to bleed to death before you'll get up off your fat arse?'

She narrowed her lips and stalked into the bedroom, re-emerging wearing a white curly-haired fur coat Even to Dodson who knew little about furs, it needed no price ticket to say it had cost three or four hundred pounds of Symes's money

'Just a minute' Dodson pulled the handbag she carried from her unresisting fingers and opened it He sorted through the

contents and took out a rent book. On its cover was printed *Miss Morag L. Grey, 47 Penkhull Street*. 'Is this you? Morag?'

She glared. 'No. I picked somebody's pocket for it.'

He dropped it back in the handbag, returning it to her. Just so that I know who you are, Miss Grey,' he said. 'Don't do anything silly like not coming back.'

She compressed her lips at him again and swung on her heel in a swirl of perfume, slamming the door as she left.

Dodson picked up a chair, placing it in front of Christou and straddling it. He shook a cigarette out from its packet and lit it, his eyes never leaving the other man's. He saw in Christou's face a heavy-lidded goatishness that would attract the erotomania in a woman. He felt the slight prick of jealousy.

Christou nodded at the cigarette. 'I'll have one of those.'

Dodson shook his head. 'No, you won't.' A cigarette, like the whisky, would be construed as an inducement to confess. Over-zealous lawyers made it impossible for a prisoner to be treated in any way but impersonally. 'Ask the Station Sergeant for one when you've been charged. Now,' he said, 'suppose you tell me what happened here tonight.'

Christou wasn't caring that much about Dodson or the prospect of being charged. Whatever had happened to him in that room paled it to a lesser significance. 'It was a straight going-over,' he said. 'I don't know who it was and I'm not making a statement.' He shut his mouth tightly and glowered.

'Describe them.'

'I told you. They wore stockings over their faces. They could have been a couple of coppers for all I knew.'

'What were they wearing?'

Christou remained silent, gnawing at his bottom lip.

'Why did they drill a hole in your shoulder?'

He shook his head.

'You're frightened of them?' He made his words contemptuous.

'Shit to you!'

'I'll probably get my information from your girl friend.'

'Get stuffed. How did you come to crawl in here anyway? You didn't just happen to find the door open.' Christou's expression showed he thought Dodson a part of his suffering.

The detective stared at him stonily but the question had knocked him. 'Did they find the money you stole from Symes?'

'Christ!' he suddenly yelled at the ceiling, working his fists impatiently. 'Save me from this stupid prick of a copper!' He was panting his frustrated, despairing anger and would have hit Dodson had he been able to reach him. 'I don't know what you're talking about!'

The detective drew on his cigarette, calm and watchful.

Christou was nothing new in his experience. They came like this bloody-minded at being caught, violent and foul-mouthed, virtually a different uncivilized species of *Homo sapiens*. He hated them. They seemed never to understand anything but reciprocal violence.

'You know Hooper had two thousand pounds on him when I arrested him? Against your share of twelve-hundred?'

Christou's head jerked, then his eyelids shut out whatever it was he had so nearly showed.

Dodson left it at that, knowing his words would fester inside Christou's mind, possibly suppurating into an incautious antagonism against his fellow prisoner. 'You said one of the men had a gun,' he pressed. 'What sort?'

'Nobody had a gun.' He was obviously anxious to get away from the subject of the money or he would have remained silent.

Dodson rose from his chair and turned the key in the lock of the door.

Christou watched him with fear in his eyes and licked his lips with a yellow tongue. 'What are you going to do?'

'Search the place.' He noticed the relief in the man's face and he smiled tightly. Christou was eminently scareable.

'You need a warrant.'

Dodson didn't bother answering. He wasn't going to turn up the money and this, he knew, would be used in Christou's favour. But he might find something else connecting him either with the Symes job or another.

He balanced his unfinished cigarette on the table's edge within reach of Christou's manacled hands. If he wanted a smoke that badly he could take it. Dodson knew he would. He hadn't the kind of pride that would choke first.

He started with the sideboard, moving it away from the wall and examining its back for anything pinned to it. He was thorough and patient, feeling with knowledgeable fingertips the canvas beneath each chair and the settee, scrutinizing each for fresh stitching, sliding a flat hand between the seat bases and the arms. He patted the curtains, feeling for paper concealed between the fabric and lining, lifting the carpet at its borders, even looking into the interior of the electric fire.

Then he searched the bedroom, a disorder of heaped clothing tipped from drawers and unhooked from the wardrobe. Apart from a sharp pinch-waisted suit in striped coffee and a shrimp-pink shirt with a lace pattern of lozenges, all of it was female. Christou appeared to be not much more than a recent and probably transitory appendage to the woman's *ménage*. He stripped the bed of its linen and turned over the mattresses. The unworn pyjama trousers were under one of the pillows he pulled from

its slip and he flung them to join the rest of the clothing on the floor

The dressing-table top was a cosmetician's display of nail lacquers and lipstick cases, of tiny phials of perfume and jars and aerosols of creams, tubes and compacts of pastes and powders and eye-shadow paints. At one side was a gold-foil chocolate box. He pulled it open. Inside, beneath a layer of quilted packing paper, were photographs, the top one of the woman recognizable as a gymslip-costumed schoolgirl. She hadn't taken too long to prove her education a waste of time. On an impulse he took a small studio portrait proof of her showing a strong resemblance to a younger, plumper Hedy Lamarr and put it in his pocket.

Leaving the bedroom, he noticed that Christou held the cigarette concealed in one cupped fist. A small haze of smoke hung over his head.

The kitchen was more difficult and he was busy opening tins and containers and lifting lids from saucepans when he heard the handle of the outer door being rattled impatiently.

She stood outside hunched with her fur coat pulled around her and shivering. 'Judas! I'm bloody frozen,' she said, pushing past him, bringing cold air with her. He re-locked the door and pocketed the key.

'They're coming?'

She nodded, appearing more composed and glancing only briefly at the tethered Christou. She wasn't feeling too sorry for him. That much was evident to Dodson.

'In the kitchen,' he ordered.

She obeyed docilely enough, seating her furred plumpness on a stool with her hands jammed in the coat pockets. She watched him broodingly while he finished his searching, keeping the cigarette she smoked held in her mouth. Soon her perfume filled the kitchen and when he passed near her he was conscious of it. She emanated a generous warmth like a glowing fire.

He was grim and preoccupied, not happy about the likely outcome of his involvement in this dangerous set-up, needing to think up a lot of acceptable explanations he would be unable to give. He looked at his watch and frowned. She had been back fifteen minutes. 'You *did* telephone?'

She scowled at him through cigarette smoke. 'I told them you wanted help. They said the cars were all out on jobs and was it urgent. I said it wasn't all that but you didn't want to stay here all night.'

'What else?'

'Nothing. I closed down. I'm not one of your bloody police-women.'

'But they're coming?'

'Yes' She flicked her glossy hair back from her forehead
'You'll be going to Headquarters with me so keep your coat on.'
'Me? What've I done?'

'Concealing the commission of an offence will do for a start.'
He knew it wouldn't stand five minutes' scrutiny by the Night
Duty Chief Inspector. He poked a finger at the fur coat 'You've
obviously been sharing the proceeds'

She pulled it tighter round her 'You keep your big maulers
off this. You'll have to do more than just say.' But she looked
worried

'And I'll need a statement from you. You mentioned in passing
that you'd been raped.' He measured her body, his policeman's
regard suggesting its improbability.

'I'm not making a complaint.' Her lip curled, resenting his
incredulity. 'So the rest of you are that much different? Filthy
pigs the lot of you.'

'You never know,' he said mildly but with an edge of sarcasm.
'One day somebody might ask you nicely.'

She stared at him, then said unexpectedly, 'Women are always
open to being asked politely, Mr Dodson. They just don't like
being used. And don't kid yourself I haven't heard of you either.
A hard-nosed bastard who'd pinch his own grandmother.'

'That's right,' he agreed, 'I have. Once for riding a bicycle
without lights. Now suppose we stop fighting and being personal
about each other.' He made his face expressionless. The bitch
stared him with her blatant uninhibited sexuality, perversely
attracted him with her laid-pale face and black hair, the fleshy
challenge of those out-thrusting breasts. He forced to the surface
his dislike of what she represented. The cow, letting filthy ig-
norant rubbish like Christou screw her. He thought of her as the
clean little gymslipped schoolgirl with the soap-shiny face and it
didn't seem possible.

She, in her turn, regarded his bulk coolly. She had seen the
sudden interest beneath his policeman's impassivity and was pre-
pared to use it to her own advantage. Particularly as she liked his
rough-hewn face with its hard uncompromising mouth. Then she
shivered. He was the despised law and therefore somebody to be
distrusted, a man to be wary of and not to be considered as having
any normal human attributes. But she was, nevertheless, drawn
to him against all her instincts.

'Tell me what happened,' he urged her. He kept his eyes away
from the body that stirred carnality in him.

'But no statement. No writing it down in that little book of
yours.'

'All right. No statement.'

He heard the sound of laboured breathing and looked through

the door at Christou. He was doubled straining in his chair, his teeth clenched and the sinews in his neck prominent, reaching down with his manacled hands to the cord tying his ankles to the chair legs.

Dodson stalked over to him, grabbing his hair and jerking him upright. The handcuffed hands swept sideways, metal and bone pistons, hitting the detective hard in the belly. Although his thick coat absorbed most of the blow's viciousness, he still grunted under the wind-stopping impact. Christou was as dangerous as a caged hyena.

Dodson grabbed and held the wrists, forcing Christou's forearms upwards and tight against his chest, knotting the ends of his necktie round the connecting chain of the handcuffs. He was held in a position of permanent supplication.

The Cypriot groaned. There were pimples of sweat on his forehead and his skin was muddy. 'My arm, you bastard!'

'You're doing it yourself,' Dodson said coldly. 'Nobody's asking you to move it.' He returned to the kitchen. The woman had been watching from the doorway. He closed the door behind him. She had switched on the cooker and she stood near the cherry-red hot plate, warming her hands.

'Why didn't you hit him back?' she asked, regarding him curiously, as if she hadn't quite got his measure.

You'd have really liked that, wouldn't you? What he had done—or hadn't done—was the slightly masochistic self-restraint of the service in the face of violence. It wasn't something he wholly agreed with.

'The pig,' she said quietly so that Christou wouldn't hear her. 'I hope he never comes out. He's a ponce. He let that bastard fuck me.'

Used as a verb and not an obscenity, the jarring word seemed a tasteless incongruity coming so casually from her mouth. And he didn't like it, using it himself only in rare moments of frustrating fury. Coming from her, it embarrassed him. 'Yes,' he said. 'Just the one?'

'Wasn't one enough? Did you want it to be the whole bloody street?' She dropped her cigarette stub on the floor, carelessly screwing it out with the sole of her shoe.

'I'm sorry. You didn't sound too concerned.'

She laughed mirthlessly. 'Well, I was. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing I said it wasn't any worse than normal. I shan't lose any sleep over it.'

'Tell me about it.' He offered her a fresh cigarette, taking one himself. He held the lighter flame to hers in a smoker's intimacy and their eyes met, scrutinizing each other, searching for what lay behind the skin mask of the other's face. He cursed himself for his

vulnerability to her sexual aura, for the trickling prurience she could engender in his loins. He was the first to break away and she twitched her lips at her recognition of his susceptibility. His authority as a policeman had been diminished by just that much he had shown himself to possess a human weakness like lust.

She dropped her voice. 'If you really want it I was in bed. Leo—that's him out there—was watching telly, waiting to go out somewhere.' There was a faint Welsh lilt in her words.

'Would you know where to—'

'I didn't ask.'

'I'm sorry. Go on.'

'I heard a knock on the outside door and Leo called out, asking who was there. I couldn't hear what was said but he unlocked the door. Then I heard a smacking sound and a shout and somebody—I guess it was Leo—fell over. Judas! I was scared. I was getting out of bed when the door opened. I could only see this man against the light from the other room. A big hulking bastard he looked. She screwed her mouth up in distaste. 'He came straight across to me—I was yelling out by then—and slapped me across the mouth.' She touched her lip with a painted fingernail. It was beginning to swell. 'He showed me a gun—said he'd use it if I didn't belt up—so of course I shut up.'

'You saw his face?'

She shook her head, her hair flopping vigorously. 'No. He had a stocking pulled down over it. It squashed his nose and mouth flat. I wouldn't know him even if I wanted to.'

'I've already got the point.'

She smiled for a second or two of white teeth. It lit up her face. She was a cow, he reassured his Puritan conscience, but a pretty one. No, he amended, an intoxicating one.

'Then,' she continued, 'he tied my hands behind me and put a towel in my mouth. I kicked the bastard,' she added with satisfaction, 'though it didn't do me any good. He slapped me silly and then bloody nearly choked me with the towel.'

'What was Christou doing all this time?'

She shrugged. 'Not doing anything about me for sure. He was in the other room with the second character.'

'One?'

'I'm sure so. I only heard one. There was a lot of scuffling and talking. I'd bet he wasn't thinking of me,' she said viciously. 'This character with me covered my head with the bedspread so I couldn't see him and switched on the light. Then he turned the room over. I could hear him chucking my stuff out of the drawers. When he'd finished he went out to the other man, switching off the light again. So I waited. There wasn't anything else I could do. Nowhere to go anyway except out of the window. Then he

came back ' She sucked jerkily on her cigarette 'He didn't switch on the light this time and he left the door open He pulled back the bedspread and I knew what he wanted ' even behind his bloody stocking ' She looked down at her body, grimacing 'You want the details?'

'No Just enough '

That seemed to please her She wasn't so tough and hard-centred as she would like him to believe 'You can guess from here on He forced me over on to my back and got on top of me '

Dodson had a mental vision of the white thighs and belly he had seen and inside his hate for the man he again felt a stir of prurience 'You struggled?'

She lifted her eyebrows, regarding him incredulously 'Tied up like a bloody roasting chicken? Are you joking? And get another punch in the mouth? Perhaps worse? He was dead *serious* '

'I'm sorry I wasn't thinking ' He wasn't quite sure how physically vulnerable a woman was in the face of a violent male lust 'Go on, please '

'While he was doing it he was calling out ' She blinked, Dodson thought at the smoke from her cigarette but not wholly

'What was he calling out?' he asked gently

She shook her head again 'Filthy pig things about what he was doing and how ' She took a deep breath, not meeting his regard now 'The other man was telling Leo what else was going to happen to me Judas! It was *happening* And Leo—the puking little sparrow-eating snot—told him to go ahead That it wasn't any skin off his stinking Greek nose ' She was reliving Christou's pusillanimity and indifference to her suffering, hating him for it

'He was being asked to tell where the Symes money was?'

She shut her face from his regard 'I don't know I don't know anything about his money '

'I'm sure not ' He dismissed the money Even a thing like Christou could claim some of her loyalty 'Between the two of us, Miss Grey, and not for the record, which one did it?'

'You know them?' Her eyes were wary, a deep sea-green guardedness protecting her from the unknown but guessed-at dangers he represented

'I might Was it the one with the crew-cut hair?'

'I wouldn't know Mine wore a cap '

'Did you smell anything on him? An embrocation?'

'Embrocation?' She looked uncomprehending

'Liniment then They use it on boxers and horses '

'No He stunk of whisky or brandy Oh, yes, and he had filthy fingers with hair on them He took one of his gloves off to gag me and I tried to bite him '

'A cockney accent?'

She nodded 'You could call it that '

'What did they call each other? Please '

'Please?' She considered that for a moment, watching him with puzzlement 'You tell me what *you* think their names might be '

'Bob?'

She nodded

'And Stan?'

'If you ever catch up with the Stan bastard, do me a favour will you?'

He showed his teeth 'You want him crucified? As well as Christou?'

'With rusty nails '

'I can imagine What happened after after he'd finished?'

'He retied my legs and left me '

'Shutting the door this time?'

'Yes And that was that until you arrived '

'But you could hear,' he pointed out 'You must have heard things You weren't the other side of town '

'No,' she admitted, 'I wasn't I did hear this buzzing sound and Leo yelling out like a dying pig Served the sod right,' she said viciously 'I'm the world's best at picking the lousiest bastards He could've '

She jerked her shoulders impatiently 'Oh, forget it '

'You heard them go?'

'I heard the door bang and Leo moaning his guts up '

'A car?'

'I didn't hear one What's the charge on Leo?'

'Breaking and entering Symes the pawnbrokers and stealing three thousand pounds or so.'

'Judas!' she breathed 'Three thousand And I didn't know.'

'It had to be split two ways He told you it was less?'

She ignored the baited question 'He always had a walletful and I never kidded myself he got it from Social Security '

'He could have,' Dodson said ironically 'You need only be an idle work-shy layabout, preferably with previous convictions and a new Jaguar in the stable ' What he was saying had more truth in it than not 'Had you known about the Symes job would it have made a difference?'

Her eyes were candid 'I couldn't swear on the Bible it would '

He heard a car draw up outside and a horn sounded Then the thumping of metal doors and the moving of heavy feet on the frost-bound pavement

'You'll have to come,' he said, 'but if that's your story and Christou doesn't tell it differently you'll be back pretty soon '

She was confident 'He won't tell you anything Not unless you use that drill on his other arm '

Which reminded him Before opening the outer door to the assistance he had asked for, he surreptitiously wiped the drill and the used brandy bottle he thought might be carrying the finger prints of Sams and the blond man

CHAPTER NINE

FERRIS'S SHIRT fascinated even Dodson's numbed sensibilities. He had rarely seen one endowed with such a crisp snowy whiteness. Against the dark ash-grey of Ferris's suit and the bronze of his sun-lamp complexion, it was luminescent. The two-inch sleeve cuffs and high collar reaching beneath the shagginess of his cream hair gave him a dandyish elegance.

He had perched himself on the corrugations of the steam radiator, his back to the window, propped in position by his stuck-out narrow-trousered legs.

Dodson had been told to sit although the cigarette, symbolic of a state of being in good and agreeable odour, had not been offered. He felt gritty and drugged with fatigue, his bolted-down canteen breakfast of sausage and eggs lodged uncomfortably in his chest. He had used the spare shaver with the damaged foil head he kept in his desk drawer and washed in the CID toilets with harsh general-issue soap. Otherwise he showed all the discrepancy of a man not having been to bed for more than twenty-four hours. Beneath it all, guilt was a black worm of unease.

Ferris was unhappy with Dodson. Even unhappier than he had been two mornings ago over his botch-up of the Symes job. His face was narrow and inquisitorial but careful. The caution he was trying to use in dealing with Dodson had its roots in the service attitude of collective responsibility—that he, to a degree, must share the responsibility for his staff's misdemeanours, for any of its members putting up a black. The hundred per cent efficient Detective Chief Superintendent only retained his rating with a hundred per cent efficient staff or, alternatively, by the dexterity with which he was able to sidestep smartly from under any subsequent fall-out of official displeasure. Ferris needed the reasons for Christou's arrest to be as explicable and acceptable as Dodson did.

And to find explicable a prisoner, tortured and trussed and completely mute about who did it, was proving impossible. And had been for the last forty minutes of cross-questioning Dodson.

'Let me get this straight,' he was saying. 'When you got this call, you had no idea from whom? Or that it was coming?'

'No, sir.' It was the half-truth he had repeated more or less

patiently, each repetition leaving him feeling that much more dirty

'And this man chose to telephone you not this Headquarters' Ferris's disbelief had been obvious from the beginning 'In the middle of the night somebody you say you didn't know'

Anonymous informants aren't all that rare'

They're rare enough to propose a lot of questions we haven't had answered yet, sergeant 'You're still certain he couldn't be one of your informants that you didn't recognize his voice?' This was accepted investigational technique persisting with the same question, wrapping it up in different words, coming back to it by a circuitous route, ignoring previous answers and seeking a discrepancy, a faltering, a weak reaction

'I'm sure'

Only this man telephoned you knew enough for him to be one of the villains concerned, didn't he?' He pulled his shirt cuffs further down over his wrists, admiring their spotlessness 'And if he was, sergeant, I want him in a cell'

'It could be as simple as it appears to be That whoever it was wanted Christou put safely in gaol Leaving him with the money'

I know all that' Ferris said testily 'It doesn't alter the fact I still want him And the other man with him' He chewed at his bottom lip, weighing up Dodson 'I'm also left wondering how he got hold of your unlisted phone number'

That isn't the most difficult thing in the world' De Moira had already explored this with him in single-minded detail

'No, it isn't,' Ferris agreed 'But still not the easiest either It's not plastered all over the telephone exchange is it? I assume you've given it to one at least of your informants?'

'To those I can trust with it, yes'

Ah! I'll need their names sergeant'

Dodson regarded him doubtfully

For someone else to speak to? I'm sorry, sir That's not possible They trust me

That's too bad, sergeant When the crunch comes, informants have to go to the wall like lesser mortals'

'Not mine' Dodson was stubborn, digging his heels in Informants were next door to being sacrosanct and Ferris knew it as well as he 'They've nothing to do with this affair I should know I was the one spoken to'

You might think you know I don't and I'm the one who's needing to be certain'

Dodson made a noise in his throat that was clearly scornful dissent

Ferris glared at him 'I require you to tell me, sergeant Don't push me into putting it on paper for the Chief Constable I don't

want any nonsense about professional ethics or privileged communications

You may not,' Dodson said, getting very close to insubordination and not caring very much, 'but the courts might Sources of information need not be given and paragraph 1346 of *Archbold* will support me' He could quote this because he had looked it up that morning, anticipating its need 'Anyway, not unless doing so is in the interest of the prisoner'

'Which this is,' Ferris snapped 'And don't chuck chapter and verse of *Archbold* at me'

'Christou hasn't complained,' Dodson pointed out He hadn't In the event, his wound had yielded more blood than seemed possible or justified from the quarter-inch deep hole that needed no more than an anti-tetanus injection and a stamp-sized strip of surgical tape on it to keep out the dirt of his environment 'And I'm telling you none of my known informants are concerned' It was the half-lie again and it made him belligerent to have to resort to it 'I'd made inquiries about the Symes job so it wouldn't be too difficult for anyone in the Crotch who knew Christou to tie him in with Hooper'

'No, it probably wouldn't But it doesn't explain an anonymous phone call' That was the speck of grit in the machinery of Ferris's mind, making him return to it again and again

Dodson stood 'If you don't believe me, say so I'm quite prepared to see the Deputy Chief Constable right this minute'

He was in a dangerous and explosive mood and Ferris, recognizing it, swallowed his bile His eyes were cold and completely unfriendly 'I'm sure you are, sergeant, but you'll see him when I think you will' He wasn't as confident over the position with informants as he appeared and he needed time to think, time to check precedents The worst thing he could conceive happening was not to be supported by the Deputy Chief Constable in forcing Dodson to disclose them So he said, 'For Christ's sake sit down and don't be so bloody touchy' He nearly offered Dodson a cigarette but knew his mood was such that he would refuse it

Dodson sat reluctantly The fact that the Chief Superintendent's disbelief was well-founded did nothing to militate against his anger at Ferris's doubting his word His bruised conscience still reacted on the basis of integrity questioned

Ferris changed his tactics

'This woman Grey She's obviously a cow Is she tomming it around with the local villains?'

Although that had been his own original assessment, Dodson still felt resentment, impelled to defend her 'Christou was living there or hiding up there That doesn't make her a whore not just because Christou turns out to be a shit'

Ferris possessed all the certainty about women of a well-married man

'She sounds like a scrubber to me '

That made her the lowest of all tarts and Dodson set his lips. 'I'm certain not,' he contradicted him 'I'd have heard about her before ' The memory of her performance in the Charge Room was still fresh and unsettling in his mind She had reverted to her hardbitten bitchy role, giving De Mora and the policeman escort little but insolent refusals to acknowledge even the facts they already knew from Dodson With Christou equally unresponsive to De Mora's initially confident and friendly approach and ending abrasively with the Detective Inspector agreeing with Dodson that whatever Christou had suffered from the electric drill it couldn't be enough, she had been entered in the Refused Charges Register and released She was a difficult woman to defend on any count and Dodson was doing it on nothing more rational than instinct and the bait of her physical attractiveness Morag He thought of her as the more acceptable Morag than Christou's 'Lil', even admitting her attraction was wholly sexual, not going so far overboard as to believe he could ever possess a community of minds with a woman like her He might, he supposed, have felt the same way about some brass-assed policewoman had his testes played him up as they were doing now, having cosy post-coital chats about *certiorari* and *Mandamus* and Subornation of Perjury His carnal attraction for the woman had little to do with his cerebral fastidiousness and, in recognizing it, Dodson recognized also his own weakness, his increasing subjection to Bradley's manipulations

Ferris made a gesture of impatience 'I think she's a scrubber, sergeant, and would need a lot of convincing otherwise Anyway, she needs watching If the magistrates release Christou this morning, he'll be back with her '

'No ' Dodson was definite I was there He shot his bolt with her so completely it wasn't true She'd let him do no more than collect his gear If she even does that ' Ferris was irritating him Anyway, why consider he might get bail? Hooper didn't '

'There isn't the same evidence against Christou He wasn't caught on the job and all we have is your uncorroborated identification of a man you saw for only a second or two There's no material evidence and neither he nor Hooper is going to make a statement ' He was prodding at Dodson's original going-it-alone arrest

'Unless they believe I'm mentally retarded or lying, I don't see how they can do anything but accept it He was as much caught on the job as was Hooper He just happened to get away '

'I hope you're right I suspect you won't be Mulready'll apply

for bail and hammer away on the fact you might have been mistaken

And I'll hammer away on the fact I'm not'

... that his client was with the Grey woman all that night As he will undoubtedly say he was'

She won't support him' He wasn't very confident about that 'Well, we'll know in an hour's time In the meantime, I'm putting Mr De Mora on the case.'

Dodson pushed his chin forward, not showing how much he was shaken. 'And taking me off?' That would be a humiliating show of no confidence and one he would have to fight

'Take you off?' Ferris looked genuinely surprised, raising his eyebrows. 'Why should I want to do that? I merely think you need some help I want those two men who sorted out Christou and I want the money I'm not having any Kray-style gangs operating here.'

Dodson tightened his lips 'No, sir' He might not be taken off officially but Ferris would find other things for him to do, keeping him busy with inquiries not directly concerned with Christou, leaving him to fight shadows if he had to It was as simple as that

And De Mora was nobody's fool He would dig something out of the rubbish, leaving Dodson with the shabby task of ensuring there was nothing in it likely to involve Sams or the other man Both were now dangerous to his continued safety And, as such dangerous also to Ursula.

He stood. 'Is that all, sir?'

'Before you go,' Ferris said, his expression forbidding 'Think seriously about this informant business I don't want to chuck Police Regulations at you but if it means getting to the bottom of this dirty business I will'

'There's nothing to think about,' Dodson replied woodenly 'And Mr De Mora can do all the rubberheeling he thinks fit He won't find otherwise'

Rubberheeling is a euphemism for the internal investigation of one police officer by another Ferris chose neither to question nor to object to its use and Dodson was not surprised he hadn't

De Mora would prepare a dossier on him He and Ferris would scrutinize it for the flaws in what he had done, the truths he had concealed, anything needed to confirm their suspicions, to give them a justification for recommending his suspension while they got on with the job of proving him corrupt.

The fist was in his guts now, pulling them out inch by inch.

CHAPTER TEN

SURPRISINGLY, Christou—predictably represented by Mulready—made no application for bail, being content to obtain an order from the magistrates for his admission to the prison hospital on reception for further examination and treatment of his wound. Mulready made the wound appear near-fatal and was insistent on the order being entered in the Court records, glancing at Dodson with contemptuous knowingness in his eyes when he did so.

Dodson didn't find it difficult to read into it that Mulready knew something of the background to the Christou episode. And that what he knew and would add to by guessing wasn't going to do the detective any good. For the sly pettifogging lawyer to believe him corrupt and on his own level would, Dodson thought, be as humiliating as anything he had yet encountered.

There were two Telex print-offs and a Telephone Message Form waiting his return to the office. The first he read was an advance report from the Provincial Police Crime Branch.

METPOL 1338/C9 + REFERENCE JAMES PH LUCKHURST + PASSPORT NUMBER 301445 ISSUED FOREIGN OFFICE LONDON 25 MAY 63 + OCCUPATION PETROLEUM ENGINEER + BORN IPSWICH 12 NOV 37 + PP RENEWED 68 BY HM CONSUL KUWAIT + DUE RENEWAL 25 MAY NEXT + PRESENT ADDRESS UNKNOWN + ENQUIRY BR PETROLEUM + NECESSARY CHECK COMPANY RECORDS KUWAIT OFFICE + FOUR DAYS DELAY-WISE + ALTERNATIVE INTERPOL ENQUIRY EXPEDITES + MESSAGE ENDS

That wasn't any good. He would need De Mora's signature to authorize any inquiry through ICPO.

The Cambridge CID had been able to be more helpful.

YOUR REQUEST 6 JAN + J P LUCKHURST + CHECK ON TRINITY HALL COLL BURSARS GRADUATE ROLL + LAST RECORDED ADDRESS + 87 FARCET FEN ROAD WITHINGTON MANCHESTER + BACKGROUND REPORT FOLLOWS TODAY'S MAIL + MESSAGE ENDS

The telephone message was from Bradley, saying he would telephone Detective Sergeant Dodson again at noon. Dodson checked his watch. It was eleven twenty-five and he needed sleep. His eyelids felt pink-rimmed and drooping, the flesh of his face loose and bloated. He imagined the lines of his features dissolving and blurring, taking on a hateful foxy cunning and animality that reflected the growing corrosion of his morality.

He checked in the *Police Almanac* for the number he wanted and lifted the receiver from the handset. He tapped out 06-228

1212 and waited, aching with his fatigue, for some remote electronic brain to connect him with the Manchester and Salford Police Headquarters. When it did he asked for a connection to the Division covering Withington, speaking to a sergeant, asking him to run a discreet identification and location check on Luckhurst at Farcet Fen Road. He told him that Luckhurst was a bigamy witness but likely to be unco-operative and leave the country if made aware of the inquiry, that any later interview would be done by himself.

Bradley came through at noon precisely. 'Harry!' he said happily, 'We've lots to talk about.'

'Yes,' Dodson replied grimly, 'we have.'

Bradley sounded amused, his high-pitched voice thin with it. 'You must be exhausted, Harry. Having been up all night.'

'You should know, Bradley. What do you want?'

'As always, dear boy, only you. I want to see you. And, no doubt, you wish to see me.'

'When? I need some sleep.'

'This evening?'

'If that's what you want.'

'Yes, I do, Harry. Would eight o'clock at the Royal Fountain suit you?'

'Just so long as I'm not required to eat there. He dropped the receiver back with stiff fingers and lit a cigarette that tasted acrid and stale.

He added the print-outs and message form, together with the photographic enlargements of the Photofit reconstructions of Bradley's features, to the thickening file he kept locked in his desk. Then he sat at his typewriter and added the facts of his wiping clean the electric drill and brandy bottle to the statement of evidence he was preparing, evidence not only against Bradley, Sams and the man he knew only as 'Stan', but also against himself.

An envelope addressed to him and postmarked Parr lay alone in the wire basket clipped to the inside of the door to his apartment. It contained the returned photographs of the two convicted Luckhursts, neither of whom was the man Ursula had married in Kuwait. What she had written was a tortured, spiky, edge-of-hysteria self-recrimination with a nib that had gouged inky cuneiforms into the paper. None of it was calculated to lift the gloom of his depression.

It was cold in the room and he plugged in the electric fire, turning on all its bars. He filled and switched on the coffee percolator. Then he lifted the telephone receiver from its cradle, leaving it dangling on its cord. Still in his overcoat, he slumped nerveless

and haggard-eyed into an armchair near the fire. After a while the percolator stopped popping away at its unwanted coffee and rattled the ceramic lid, the noise not even beginning to penetrate the exhausted sleep into which he had fallen.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DODSON had not yet made the transition from an unrefreshing sleep to a full awareness of the world outside his skull. Muffling fatigue was still with him, staling his alertness. He had swallowed a whisky to help along the slow metamorphosis but it was reluctant to come.

Entering the bright warmth of the bar of the Royal Fountain, he halted abruptly. Watching him from the counter was the blond man, his loose mouth twisted into a sly insolence at the sight of Dodson.

Dodson remained motionless, blood draining from his face, anger for what he remembered had been done to the woman Morag pulsing the arteries in his wrists. He hesitated only because his first instinct was to recklessly release the violence the man provoked. Here was represented the embodiment of everything he most hated: a mocking, callous criminality; an untameable brutishness at which he wanted to shout, to stamp on and smear into a bloody paste.

The man's lank hair hung untidily over his forehead, the stone-yellow eyes not leaving Dodson's, enjoying his surprise, derisive of the antagonism he saw in the detective's face. He wore a mouse-grey soft leather coat over tight twill trousers and dark-chocolate suede shoes. He stood, waiting for Dodson's reactions, a glass in front of him, a thin cheroot burning an unwavering streamer of smoke between his fingers. He was alone, conspicuously not with the other men crowding the bar.

Dodson chose the opposite end of the counter, standing there and waiting the attention of the busy bartender. His face was impassive now and under control, feeling his watcher's eyes on him, his regard as tangible and repellent to him as the touch of squirming maggots.

The man moved towards Dodson, bringing his glass with him. 'Ullo, mate.' He was near enough for the detective to see the late-evening's bristle of blond whisker-ends on the chin and jowls, the gloss on the bulb of the bony nose and the square teeth like dirty ceramic tiles in the sneering mouth. Beer fumes and the smell of strong tobacco came with the words. 'I'm to say Mr Bradley won't be comin' in 'E feels you let 'im down las' time.'

Dodson, unmoving, held him with flat minatory eyes, saying nothing

'You're to go out the back way, mate 'E's waitin' for you' He bared his stained teeth 'I'll 'ang on 'ere Jus' in case'

Dodson ignored the approaching bartender and shouldered past the blond man, not trusting himself to speak. He left him there still grinning his loose-lipped insolence, not looking back.

A gleaming Rolls-Royce stood outside, its engine mumbling quietly in the cold night, its showroom-polished flanks trembling, filling the narrowness of the lane. A green-uniformed driver, seeing Dodson's approach, held the rear door open for him to enter. Bradley, wearing his British Warm, waved his orange-bowled pipe in a cotton-gloved hand, beckoning to him. 'Get in, Harry. You're letting in the cold.'

He sat next to Bradley, separated from him only by the pull-down arm. The door was shut with a heavy engineered precision behind him and the car pulled away soundlessly into the mercury-vapour blue lights of the main street.

'I'm sorry to be so dramatic, Harry,' Bradley said. He was relighting his pipe, puffing smoke at the rose-pink curtained glass screen separating him from the driver. 'But you really disappointed me last time. Oh,' he assured the detective, 'not only because you intended following me. But the crude way in which you did it. I expected something far more subtle—much more professional.'

'Did Sams complain about the crude way he got his finger bent?'

Bradley smiled. 'You really must be careful, Harry. Mr Sams is a dangerous man.'

'Where are we going?'

The car had reached the end of the street and was heading out of town. Bradley switched on the interior lights.

Nowhere in particular, Harry. Just travelling.' He reached forward, opening a small hide-covered door in the bulkhead at his knees and pulling down a folding table. He selected two tumblers and took a silver liquor flask from the pocket of his coat. 'A whisky? To keep the cold out?'

'No. Where are we going?' Dodson repeated. He partly withdrew his cigarettes but changed his mind. He had smoked fifty the previous day and night and his chest ached from them.

Bradley unstopped the flask and poured an inch in each of the two tumblers. They were motoring fast now but the lack of noise was uncanny, the whisky almost unrippled in the tumblers.

'As I said, just travelling,' he answered Dodson. 'We can talk in comfort without interruption.' He sounded immensely pleased with himself. 'And without any unpleasant mutual suspicion that we may each be having the other followed.'

'You've been watching too much television, Bradley'

'I know All the same, don't bother with the car's registration number, Harry I rented it under an assumed name' He smiled again, wagging his head at something amusing him. 'And the driver's neutral'

'It wouldn't surprise me to find out you've had him wired for recording It wouldn't worry me either'

Bradley sipped at his whisky and beamed 'You flatter my ingenuity'

'Who's the leathered-up horse slaughterer you had meet me in the bar? Sams's friend'

'Mr Doust?' He clicked his tongue. 'You do him an injustice, Harry You really do'

'Who is he?'

'Um A rather curious character A failed hangman I'm afraid' He made it sound as if he'd ploughed his A-levels 'Doing what he can to eke out until hanging's reintroduced'

'He looks it What failed him? It couldn't have been his lack of aptitude for it'

'Ah, Harry, no details Doust isn't, of course, his real name' He lowered his voice, making what he was about to say a confidence 'He served in one of the colonies or protectorates I understand he turned out to be a little too heavy-handed even for hanging the very nasty types in well, wherever it was Of course, the Prison Commission has no opening for an assistant hangman in this enlightened age so you could say he was driven to evil ways by need'

'You weren't very clever, Bradley Using him and Sams to get Symes's money out of Christou It was a bloody stupid set-up The only good thing you've done is to diminish my value to you Nobody's going to trust me for very much longer'

'Oh, dear' He put on a look of mock concern 'I've embarrassed you, Harry?'

'You can call it that Leaving me to explain an anonymous and improbable telephone call and a tortured prisoner. It's the sort of thing I can take in my stride' He regarded Bradley contemptuously 'You didn't really think it was going to be accepted, did you?'

'I had confidence in your coping with its rough edges, dear boy'

'Rough edges like Sams and Doust waving guns about? Did they feel so very outnumbered?' His expression was wholly denigrating 'Just another pair of weak-minded, strong-arm bruisers you can hire down at the dock for beer money'

'Believe me, they're not And the guns were models'

'I'm not in a believing mood'

The Rolls turned smoothly into the dark tunnel of the motor-

way, its speed increasing, the acceleration pressing them gently back against the overstuffed leather upholstery

'They really were,' Bradley insisted 'Good ones but models just the same Quite incapable of being fired, I give you my word' He pursed his lips 'Be reasonable, Harry You couldn't expect them to go in waving fairy wands'

'Doust raped the woman You knew?' He could see that Bradley was neither surprised nor concerned

'Didn't somebody or another say "to the victor the spoils"?' 'Don't be so Victorian, Harry It's an age of violence A woman losing a bit of pussy isn't of any moment'

'You're a callous bastard, Bradley I can see you never knew your own mother'

Bradley tightened his small mouth and for a second, a glint of anger showed in the shiny brown eyes Then he smiled 'I should have said women such as Christou would have'

'Not even that kind, Bradley, when they don't want it . . when they're tied up What about the money they were after?'

Bradley looked wryly at him 'He hadn't too much of it left Just over seven hundred' He shrugged philosophically 'It helps to pay for this very pleasant ride Gets back a little of my outgoings In any case, Christou was turned over to you as a sort of muscle-flexing exercise To prove I could do it I didn't expect too much of a profit from it What we got was a bonus' He put a hand on Dodson's thigh and squeezed 'I've made the point I promised Now will you trust me?'

Dodson barked his scorn, jerking his leg away from Bradley's grasp He couldn't bear the soft touching of his fingers, even through the thick cloth of his coat

'I mean my efficiency, Harry' His expression was mild, showing no resentment for the rejection of his touch

'All right You've proved you get around, that you employ a couple of ruthless and nasty apes to do your dirty work You've proved also I'm nearly as corrupt as you are A tame jackal,' he finished with self-condemning savagery, 'without the guts to put you three bastards inside a cell'

Bradley's face looked concerned 'I'd rather hoped you wouldn't be quite so emotionally bitter, Harry that you'd come to rationalize your guilt thing to an acceptable level' Then there was open mockery in his voice 'After all, greater love hath no man than he lays down his incorruptibility for a pretty sis'

'Shut up' Dodson slapped him sideways hard across the mouth with the back of his hand, knocking the pipe flying from between his teeth It hit the window glass with a sharp rap, scattering burning cinders over the carpeted floor

Bradley's head jerked back violently, his face screwed with

anguish and shock. He closed his eyelids, stiffening his body and fighting to the edge of hysteria for control, his white-gloved fingers clenching and unclenching. A red weal showed the stinging force of Dodson's blow.

When he opened his eyes they were hating the detective. His lips trembled and his voice shook. 'Harry,' he said hoarsely, 'Don't ever, ever hit me again.'

'And don't you ever make smart-alec cracks about my sister, Bradley, or I'll kill you. I'll kill you anyway if you ever use your information against her.' The bitter menace was plain on his face. 'That I haven't done so already is only because of her.'

Bradley dabbed at his mouth with a pad made from his folded handkerchief. The anger had died from his eyes and he had regained his calm although his breathing was still uneven. 'You're very free with your hands for a policeman, Harry. And it's only because I understand that I forgive you.'

I told you before. You've only got part of me. Don't bank on the part you haven't got.'

'All right, my dear fellow,' he said mildly. 'I apologize for my misplaced humour. In future I'll leave Mrs Stephens out of our conversation. There's enough between us to allow us to go on working together. Enough to ensure that if I fall, you fall with me.' He showed his teeth. 'It would be a comfort.'

The pungent smell of burning wool reached their nostrils and Bradley retrieved his pipe, scuffing the sole of his shoe over the thread of smoke rising from the carpet.

'Tell me what you want, Bradley. I've had a bellyful of you already.'

'I want to help you with another job, Harry.'

Dodson stared at him in disbelief. 'You're mad! Not for me you don't. I'm in trouble enough over Christou.'

'I thought the arrest would justify itself.'

Dodson shook his head angrily. 'No you didn't. You landed me up shit creek deliberately.' He recalled Christou's knowing look and Mulready's undisguised contempt. 'What sort of a story did Sams give Christou while he was drilling holes in him?'

'I think it was Mr Doust who did the drilling, Harry. Quite against my instruc-

'Sams did the talking. Doust isn't intelligent enough.'

'Ah! Some of this is your own fault, my dear chap. I'm afraid you've made an enemy of Mr Sams by dislocating his finger and making him look rather silly. And I was hoping you'd be friends colleagues. Because of what you did, he foolishly allowed Christou to believe he was being handed over to you as, er, part of an arrangement. He won't say anything, naturally, being a very timid man beneath all his bad language, but then

'He's already said it,' Dodson interrupted him. 'His solicitor knows.'

Bradley raised his eyebrows over the glass from which he was about to drink 'I see So he knows It's not a crime Does it matter so much? He can't use it'

'Like hell he can't He'll use it to discredit me in the witness box, implying I had a hand in torturing his client, probably suggesting I had part of the money too'

Bradley smiled gently 'Isn't that the usual lawyer's ploy, anyway? To attack the police officer in the case? Whether it's true or not?'

They were driving through the darkness of open country, the verges of the road glimmering with drifts of snow picked out by the four dazzling bars of their lights Bradley leaned forward and pulled aside the curtain, tapping on the plate glass with the knuckle of one finger When the driver swivelled his head, he made a circular motion with his forefinger 'I think we'd better be getting back, Harry I believe I've convinced you we've a mutual need to continue working together At least for a while'

'You'll come unstuck, Bradley,' Dodson said heavily 'You clever buggers always do And I'll come unstuck with you'

Bradley shook his head 'No Not if you do your part properly' 'So you keep saying What duty part have you got in mind for me?'

Bradley rubbed his cotton-covered finger and thumb together, his face sharp and greedy 'You know, Harry Enough for, say, a Mediterranean villa—I've always fancied the Provence as being decently civilized—with a bit left over for a bottle or two of wine'

'And how much is that?' He detected the preliminary rumbles of a coming crunch

'We-e-ell, there's Mr Sams and Mr Doust to take care of They'll be redundant when I've gone Say ' He paused deliberately, exploring Dodson's probable reactions 'say fifty thousand pounds? Minimum,' he qualified

Dodson's eyebrows clamped down 'You're insane! Where the hell can you get that sort of money!'

'Come off it, Harry Be realistic These are inflationary times You can get that amount knocked off in one half-assed bank job and think nothing of it I read in *The Police Review* your city lost nearly two million last year And the police are still in employment Nobody started making you redundant because of it'

'You're twisting facts, Bradley, to suit your argument You forget the arrests, the property recovered'

Bradley waved a derisory hand 'Well below the half-million, Harry'

Bradley was right Despite its having been a good year for

property recovered. Usually it was less than twenty-five per cent. 'Where does your friend Luckhurst come into all this? You missed him from the share-out.'

'Ah, yes. Deliberately so, Harry. I think he's quite happy to leave any profitable spin-off from his affairs to me. And he'll be on his way to Australia very soon anyway.' He coughed gently. 'I did tell you, my dear chap, that I'd already financed him. Be decent about it. Your sister could really have been in a parlous position had I not intervened.' He kept his eyes steady on Dodson. 'So we come to the nub, Harry. Will you help me with some information?'

'Information?' he echoed. Now that the demand had arrived he could accept it a lot more calmly than he had anticipated. Perhaps, he thought, he had been conditioned over the past few days to an acceptance of something worse.

Official information, Harry. Would you go that far?

'Probably not. It depends what.'

'Not to get me off your back?'

Dodson's mouth twisted in a disbelieving grimace. 'The usual blackmailer's promise.'

The car drifted to a halt at the entrance to a slip road and took the loop, curving down into the motorway, heading back to town.

Bradley drank from the glass he had poured for Dodson. 'It is,' he agreed. 'And not keeping it gets them into trouble. But this isn't blackmail.' It seemed to matter to him. 'You use harsh words.'

'Yes, I do. Try explaining the difference to a judge.'

'God forbid,' he said with pseudo alarm. 'But you know, Harry, people often find it necessary or convenient to do things to avoid distasteful consequences. It happens in politics, certainly in business. Because you're a policeman with—you'll forgive me—a somewhat narrow viewpoint on life, it reads only blackmail to you. But we shouldn't quibble over semantics, my dear chap. The important thing is that you've convinced me you have a breaking point. That my going beyond it would do neither of us any good.'

'No, it wouldn't. And you're getting close to it.'

Bradley made a small gesture of frustration. 'Can't I convince you that apart from all this I want us to be friends, Harry?' His shiny brown eyes were trying to worm into Dodson's brain. He looked like a man about to put his hand with homosexual intent on another's genitals. 'I'd honestly prefer it.'

'I told you before,' Dodson said implacably. 'I already have one.' Bradley was regarding him as a woman might an attractive man and he glowed hot with embarrassment, avoiding the older man's eyes.

Bradley smiled wryly. 'As you wish' He broke off the intent gaze and put his whisky down, becoming brisk. 'Now, the job I have in mind I've good information about a bookmaker who keeps his winnings under the bed, well away from any prying by the Inland Revenue I don't think he could complain too loudly, Harry, were he to lose it'

Dodson thought he knew who the bookmaker was and didn't doubt the accuracy of Bradley's information

'So?'

'His premises are alarmed I may need some detailed information about how and exactly where Your supplying it,' he added casually, 'avoids knocking a panda car driver on the head to get it I know they carry the codes and plans about in their cars'

'And you're not joking'

'Good Lord, no I'd considered it seriously at one time'

'Well don't' Dodson's face was iron 'That's another thing not in the contract'

'All right, Harry Just so that there's an alternative'

'You want your electric drill back as well I suppose?' He was heavily ironic

'That was an exception It won't happen again Well? What about the information?' He leaned forward, eager for the answer

'What if I tell you to get stuffed?'

He sank back in his seat 'If you meant it I'd probably give you up as a bad job, as an unwise investment, doing what I have to do without you'

'But not before you'd fixed things for me Is that what you mean?'

'Regrettably, yes'

'I meant it when I said I'd probably kill you,' he said calmly. 'I'd like you to take that seriously'

'I do, Harry, I most certainly do But you'd have to catch me first, wouldn't you? And I don't suppose I need tell you that if it did happen I've made some very reliable arrangements for the papers about your sister to reach the Director of Public Prosecutions' He beamed amiably. 'Apart from all that, I really am quite capable As are Mr Sams and Mr Doust'

Dodson gazed sombrely at his reflection in the window glass at his side, weighing the alternative, seeking a way out There wasn't one not fraught with danger for Ursula But he could buy time, delay the moment as long as possible in the hope that God or somebody might intervene and release him from his dilemma It wasn't very likely and he didn't believe in miracles More probably, he thought pessimistically, something would happen to push him even deeper in the pit

'All right,' he said at last. 'When?'

'Thank you, Harry' He sounded grateful and his eyes were soft 'Not yet When I'm completely briefed and ready'
'You'd better tell Sams and Doust to stay out of sight for a while'
'Oh? Why?'

His words came reluctantly like pieces of wire wool emerging from a constricted throat 'A Detective Inspector's been detailed to the Christou inquiry You can't rely on my being able to do anything for you in that direction'

'Ah!' Bradley rubbed the palms of his gloved hands together. 'You're worried?'

'Shouldn't I be?' he asked bitterly

'Not really Christou isn't going to say anything I promise you that There's nothing else, is there?'

'Other than giving you my blood, I can't think of anything'

'Good Then your inspector won't get very far What's his name?'

'De Mora And he's good'

'I respect your opinion, Harry' He put a hand on Dodson's arm 'I'd willingly give you Mr Sams if I thought it would help you personally'

Dodson frowned 'Sams? What do you mean?'

'I'd let you arrest him on suspicion' The thought was amusing Bradley 'I'm sure he wouldn't mind much Christou wouldn't identify him, of course Nor the woman And I rather suspect he has about fifteen other people who would swear themselves blue in the face that he was somewhere else He shook his head sadly 'No You couldn't keep him inside five minutes, Harry, and I don't think that would do you any good at all'

'You talk a lot of stupid tit, Bradley,' Dodson growled But he suspected there was more than a little seriousness in what the other man had said

They were back in the illuminated streets on the outskirts of the town and Bradley flicked off the interior lights He tapped on the glass screen and flapped his hand for the driver to stop the car 'I'll drop you here, Harry, if you've no objection You'll know where to find a taxi rank And Harry!'

Dodson paused with the door partly open 'Yes?' He waved away the driver's attentions impatiently

'Please don't try and follow me Or have me followed. Mr Sams doesn't need too much of a reason to be horribly nasty'

Dodson slammed the door on his words, making even the big Rolls-Royce shudder and the driver wince He needed the release of extreme violence Either a score-settling Sams or the anthropoidal Doust would be an acceptable catalyst for it He memorized the index plate as the car glided away It was an ingrained habit and he didn't expect the number to tell him anything useful He

stood until the car was out of sight, then turned his coat collar up against the biting chill and started walking.

He needed a drink to anaesthetize himself against the guilt and self-contempt that crawled in his guts like a hungry tape-worm.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DODSON found a public house—the Wellington Arms—that gave him what he wanted in whisky and a proper taciturnity in its bartenders. He had hooked himself to the counter by his elbows with an I WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE notice printed clearly in the unfriendly lines on his face. He was outside his own Division and not so known or familiar a character. Nobody chose to look at him with the cautious wary stare reserved for policemen using a bar. He was as anonymous as he wished to be.

He had drunk himself from a mood of black despair into one of smouldering defiance. *Stuff De Mora! Stuff Ferris! Stuff the Deputy Chief Constable! Stuff every bastard!* Already he was forced to regard De Mora and Ferris as his enemies, working and scheming his destruction.

He looked around the bar with the truculent air of a man anxious to take umbrage at the shape of another man's nose or the colour of his shirt. But it was Doust he wanted, his loathing for the man obsessive, the unexpended violence in him needing to beat his mocking face for its release. Primarily because, he admitted, having spent parts of it on Bradley and Sams, the remainder was now canalized on Doust. And the woman and her raping came into it. He was honest enough to recognize that.

With the illogical purpose of a drunken man strong in his mind he left the bar. Doust might be returning to the woman's flat and he convinced himself of its possibility. Also, he assured himself, he needed to know if De Mora had spoken to her again.

He walked unsteadily, his hands deep in his pockets, hunched against the freezing cold, thinking hungrily of Doust, of finding him at the flat, picturing ferociously the blood and anguish of the blond man's suffering as he pounded him to insensibility. People passing him stared at his withdrawn expression and unseeing eyes as he blundered along the slippery footpath.

Before entering Penkhull Street he stood waiting on the blind side of a stationary van, recalling Ferris's remark that the woman needed watching. There could, he knew, be a detective keeping observation on her flat. Nothing moved but discarded keeping wrappings scraped along the gutters by the wind. He walked the length of the street, checking the interiors of parked cars, shadowed

doorway recesses and alley entrances The same orange light shone from the windows over the ironmonger's shop

He entered the outer door and mounted the dark stairs as soundlessly as a cat The walk had sobered him without altering his intent

From behind the door came the muted noise of a television programme He recognized it as the ten o'clock news With his tongue thick in his mouth, he breathed in deeply, knocking on the wooden panel He heard the volume of the announcer's voice being diminished and there was a short silence Then her voice came from close to the door, 'Who is it', not frightened but sharp and wary

Sergeant Dodson '

A key turned in the lock and the door opened the few inches allowed it by a safety chain She peered through the crack and, recognizing him, unhooked the chain

She wore a turquoise sweater with a tobacco-brown skirt, looking anything but Christou's slut Her pale face was without make-up and was better for it and still doing things to his breathing. She flicked her black hair away from her face and smiled up at him Her breath had alcohol on it 'I thought you'd come,' she said softly

He frowned 'Oh?'

She replaced the safety chain and relocked the door.

'That's new'

Yes, Your Inspector De Mora advised me to have it fitted' Her speech, still with its Welsh lilt, sounded less coarse He thought she might adapt it, chameleon-like, to suit the occasion Or company She turned the switch on the television, the silent jerking picture suddenly diminishing to a bright spot in the centre of the screen

'He's been here then?' It didn't surprise him

'This afternoon Are you taking off your coat?'

Swaying slightly he unbuttoned and removed it 'More about what happened last night?'

'Yes' She took the coat from him and draped it on a chair She still moved in the aura of her unsettling perfume 'Are you going to sit?'

He opened his jacket and obediently lowered himself on to the settee she indicated, sinking gratefully into its softness, the velvet of its covering warm to his body He noticed it had been repaired, the stitching visible and the cushions somehow restuffed

The only illumination came from a parchment-shaped table lamp and it cast an apricot circle of diffused light in one corner The electric fire was burning on all bars, the room warm and comfortable It had been rearranged and cleaned and showed

few signs of the previous night's disorder. A paler patch in the carpet where somebody had used soap and water was the only evidence of Christou's suffering. For Dodson, putting its past associations from his mind, it was a sheltering golden cave in a hostile cold world.

'I'm drinking,' she said. 'Can I get you one? Or are you on duty?'

'I'm on duty,' he lied. Calling on her off duty would be too blatant. 'But I'd be glad of one. A whisky without anything in it, please.'

While she poured it, he studied her from behind; seeing the neatness of her shoulders, the swelling lushness of her hips and the long slim legs.

'No more trouble?' he asked.

She shrugged. 'If you mean policewise, I'm not in a cell.'

'Tell me what De Mora wanted.'

She came to him putting the glass in his hand. Then she kicked off her shoes and sat at the other end of the settee, tucking her legs beneath her. Her own glass she balanced on the settee's arm. She was as relaxed as if she had known him as a lover. 'Is he a friend of yours?'

'He's a colleague and my immediate senior.' He offered her a cigarette and held the flame of his lighter to it. His fingers shook slightly at her nearness and she noticed. He changed his mind about giving it up and lit one for himself. It was his first of the day.

'He was very interested in what happened here,' she said.

'I imagine he was.'

She hesitated, searching for the right words. 'I mean, in what you did here.'

'I see.' A tiny coal of resentment burned in him. Ferris hadn't wasted any time in starting his rubberheeling operation. 'You told him?'

'Every tiny detail. I did right?'

'Yes. I have nothing to hide.'

She regarded him curiously from her green eyes. 'Does he think you have?'

He kept his face uncommunicative. 'I wouldn't know.'

'Well, what I told him couldn't possibly reflect on you.'

'Thank you. Why the change from this morning?'

She made a *move*. 'I didn't tell him anything about myself. He hadn't already been told by Sergeant Dodson. Or anything about Christou.'

He was glad she hadn't called Christou 'Leo' and he gave her a small grin. 'I hope you didn't swear in front of De Mora. He's a Seventh Day Adventist or something. And very proper with it.'

A slight touch of pink stained the flesh over her cheekbones.

and for a moment she was discomposed 'I'm sorry about last night I was angry upset Words get accepted'

'I was joking,' he said hastily 'Not being critical You were saving you weren't telling De Mora anything he didn't already know Does that include not telling me anything more either?'

'Yes, I'm sorry' Her face shadowed 'Please don't ask me It isn't in me to inform on anyone even Christou'

'I didn't expect you to and I'm not going to twist your arm about it'

'Thank you' She examined the printing on the butt of the cigarette 'Don't you want to know why?'

He was undecided for a moment, then said lightly, 'Not unless it's due to any excess of affection for him'

'It's not,' she answered crisply Her eyes were suddenly bright as she stared at him 'You would mind if it was?' She was a very direct woman

'It would be misplaced,' he temporized He couldn't take it further

'What's your name?' she asked him

He was surprised and misunderstood her

'You know, Dodson'

'Yes,' she said dryly, tapping ash carefully from the cigarette 'Do you want me to call you Mr Dodson? Or Sergeant?'

'You'd prefer something else?' His policeman's unapproachability seemed suddenly ridiculous 'Something like Harry?'

It fits your face It becomes you'

So does darkness' He wanted her so badly it wasn't believable and he tried to mask it from her constant regard of him

She wrinkled her small nose 'It's a nice face'

'It lies'

'I don't think so But a bit of a Bluebeard,' she added smiling Her teeth were porcelain white, her tongue a healthy pink

He scratched his chin self-consciously 'It grows quickly,' he said, excusing the emerging stubble

'Why did you come to see me, Harry?' Her use of his first name was warm.ing

He twisted the glass in his fingers, conscious of her eyes and their continuing regard He'd asked her nothing and could think of nothing relevant he hadn't asked her before He wasn't remotely likely to admit he had come just to see her, drawn inexorably like a dog to the compulsive scent of a bitch, even were he to wrap the reason in more socially acceptable words

'Why did you say you thought I'd come?' he countered weakly

'I just thought you would' Her eyes were soft 'Are you in trouble, Harry?'

He turned down the corners of his mouth 'You're probing'

'Yes Some of the questions I was asked this afternoon seemed well, as if things weren't quite right for you '

'I don't know why they shouldn't be '

'I'm sorry I just thought you might

'Well, I'm not,' he said shortly He cursed De Mora in his mind for his clumsy questioning of her It mattered to him that she should believe him unflawed

She leaned forward, putting a hand over his It was soft and warm and he felt excitement in her touch He imagined it doing things to him and he swallowed, letting it stay there

'I've upset you,' she said

'No '

She was staring at him unblinkingly, a look of inquiry in her eyes as if trying to discern the motives in his being there Against her pale skin her hair was the glossy black of moist liquorice

He shook his head to clear it, feeling like a blindfolded bull, then held out his empty glass 'Could I have another, please? A small one?'

She took the glass in her fingers but he held on to it, pulling her towards him 'Your name,' he said thickly 'It is Morag?' He knew it would be necessary for him to disassociate everything about her from Christou, to disinfect his mind of the knowledge of their being together

She leaned towards him, her mouth inches away, her breath warm on his ace 'You don't like Lily?' She was uncannily perceptive

'For somebody else, possibly '

'You mean it's all right for for Christou? But not for Harry Dodson?'

'Yes' Close to him, he could feel the heat of her body her perfume dizzying him with its aphrodisiacal fragrance Her eyes were, he decided, the deep green of *crème de menthe* drunk from crystal glasses He wanted to swim in them

'My father called me Morag I've never wanted anybody else to '

He put an arm behind her back

She licked her lips with the tip of her tongue, moistening them 'I wouldn't want Sergeant Dodson to' She needed to disassociate him too

'No?' He stiffened for a moment Christ! He was making a bloody fool of himself

'Harry Dodson, yes' Her breasts were squashing hard on his chest, a straining intensity in her face His need for her had a compulsive urgency He slid an open hand beneath her buttocks and lifted her loins against his His excitement made him not far from vomiting his heart pounding against its rib-cage

'I forgot,' he said hoarsely 'I should ask you nicely'

'Yes, yes,' she whispered, putting her mouth on his, darting her tongue between his teeth. He tasted her saliva, his wanting her hard against her thighs. She moaned her need to be possessed, then abruptly twisted herself away and stood.

She took his hand and pulled him to his feet. His legs were shaking.

'Properly,' she urged him. 'Love me properly.'

Thank God, he thought, *she didn't use the other word*. He didn't want Lil. He wanted Morag. And Morag wouldn't use obscenities.

She moved to the corner of the room, switching off the lamp, leaving only the orange glow of the fire. Standing facing him, her face calm, she peeled off her sweater, her eyes never leaving his. She dropped it on to the settee, then unhooked her brassière, releasing her glossy pale breasts with their purple-brown nipples.

Both naked and each awkward with the strangeness of the other, she came to him, pasting her body to his, clinging with strong arms and transmitting the heat she generated like a glowing furnace.

He was brutal in his thrusting need, jolting her body, his flesh slapping hard against the softness of hers. And that was how she wanted him, writhing on the carpet beneath him and fighting him, submitting only at the white-hot, flame-leaping end when she bit his throat, mewling like a kitten in her mounting orgasm.

They lay, panting their exhaustion like broken-winded runners.

'Don't leave me, Harry sweetheart,' she whispered into his mouth, holding him locked to her. 'I love you. I love you.'

'No,' he said, a small desperation in his voice. 'You don't. You *can't*.'

'I can, sweetheart. I knew when I saw you again tonight.' Her eyes were full of dark loving and enormous.

Even now, while he was in her, a detached and cynical segment of his consciousness reminded him of the filthy Christou of his possessing her. She would have kissed him too, putting her tongue into his pig's mouth and opening her thighs to him, telling him 'Yes, yes.' And Doust. He groaned silently at the thought.

She reached and took his head between her hands, pressing his face into the silky pillows of her breasts.

'Harry,' she whispered, 'I do love you.' And she did. Or thought she did. He was completely unlike the men she had known and had taken away the humiliating taste of the man she knew only as 'Stan'.

He shook his head stubbornly against the smooth flesh but she breathed deeply and he thought she slept.

The biblical warning to acne'd schoolboys he had memorized

in his youth ran through his mind *For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb and her mouth is smoother than oil, but her end is bitter as wormwood and gall, sharp as a two-edged sword*

Christ! What have I done?' he growled despairingly into her breasts, his desire fled furtive and hangdog. He must have been mad. Hung up on nothing more erotic than two swollen bladders of sebaceous glands with a baby's comforter stuck on each. That's all they were and he, Detective Sergeant Harry Dodson, aged thirty-odd years and knowing better, had slobbered over them like an overgrown piglet. Undone by something as ephemeral as an ejaculation. And the wormwood and gall end. No different, he thought in the abyss of dejection, than fifty million others and viewed objectively—as he had scores of times on mortuary dissection tables—as uninviting as an empty purse.

Dodson was deep in the trauma of post-coital disenchantment and disgust, a victim of his depleted testes. He felt ashamed of what he had done, of his uncouth nakedness, the ashes of his drunkenness bleaching the colours from the memory of his fled lust.

After a while he raised his head and looked at her sleeping face in the orange glow of the fire, seeing in its unconscious repose something more than the animal exhaustion of casual fornication. He thought he could discern in her a real affection and dignity giving no reason for his cheap cynicism. She possessed a generosity and kindness that complemented the physical attraction of her body, an attraction that, despite the usage of it by Christou and Doust, he believed sweet and clean. And if she was amoral, then how much more so were those women, envied and publicized, who screwed their way from one easy marriage to another. And, Dodson suspected, there were few enough like her in the honesty of their lusts.

With his awakening need for her love—he hesitated over even thinking the word—there returned to his mind the riotous colours and sensations his anticipation of her roused, his imagery bright and vivid. He felt the stir of his rising hunger for her body and he moved on her, kissing the marshmallow-soft mouth, for the first time with something approaching tenderness and affection. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

'I love you, Morag,' he said, the unfamiliar words sounding strange and embarrassingly maudlin, his policeman's caution qualifying them to an excitement of fleshy nostalgic longing. He wanted to be with her for as many nights as he could imagine there were to be in his life. Which, he supposed, might be the same thing as love.

She dug her nails into his naked shoulders and arched herself

beneath him, her eyes gleaming between half-closed lids, wanting to engulf with her body this big, unhappy, woman-ignorant man she was determined to keep, to protect from the troubles he failed so stupidly to see waiting for him

He was gentle with her this time, responding to the tenderness of her loving, repulsion leaving him without disgust or regret

Afterwards, dabbing moist kisses on his mouth, she said, 'Harry sweetheart, I've never seen you smile'

'I haven't had much to smile about'

'You don't feel sorry for yourself?'

'No' That was a lie, he thought, self-denigratingly I'm wallowing in it But she made him feel less alone, less wretched, and that was a big something nobody else had done

When she let him out at five o'clock the black morning was fugid and silent with frosted roof slates and echoing empty streets He walked warm and no longer alone, drunk now only with fatigue, the memory of Morag at his side like a perfumed ghost

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DODSON was in his office at nine o'clock, the smell of Morag showered from his body He had changed his stale clothing and swallowed four aspirins, regarding the jar sombrely, wishing the way out from his torment could be that simple A small handful, crushed in milk and flooded down with enough raw whisky to ensure a happy irresponsible oblivion with no cold, decision-making dawn to face He sent a typist for a paper cup of unsweetened coffee from the automatic dispenser before he coughed on his first cigarette of the day deciding he would have to live with the fatigue that lay on him like a leaden blanket

The euphoria of his night with Morag had gone and with it most of the tenderness he had felt for her, dissipated into a dream-like memory by the flesh-and-blood nagging of his problems His physical subjection to her remained, a drugging refuge for his loneliness but with the taint of her association with Christou a barrier to his complete emotional surrender

There was a coiled need in him for action, action to resolve the mind-shredding punishment he was inflicting on himself He felt as shabby and dirty as the office in which he worried away at his guilt, isolated by it from his colleagues, a moral leper if only—so far—to himself, his honesty flaking from him like old whitewash leaving patches of corruption The policeman in him was still a factor, making him refuse stubbornly the total surrender of his probity to the criminality he so hated in others

scrutiny, would, once revealed and investigated, lead straight to her. And De Mora was unlikely to conduct his inquiries with any excess of consideration and tact. He had already demonstrated his lack of either. It was his indifference to Dodson's knowing that revealed the seriousness of their suspicions. The detective wondered if Ferris knew more than the single item of Christou's telephoned betrayal. The fact that there had been no follow-up to the Chief Superintendent's demand for the name of the anonymous caller was significant and disturbing.

It wasn't in Dodson to stand much more of this distrust or his own debilitating self-denigration. The sun shining bars of cold light through his windows seemed a mockery.

Timmins had news for him. The man Luckhurst, he told Dodson, lived in Faicet Fen Road with his wife, Susan, and one child. He had married her in June 1969 at the Blackfriars Road Registry Office. Luckhurst was an area manager employed by the Marlow & Blagden Engineering Company in Manchester and had been for the past three years. Timmins had run a name check on him at Criminal Intelligence with a negative result. Luckhurst left his home at eight each morning, returning promptly at sixteen, using the firm's Rover 2000 car. He played golf on Sundays and watched rugby on Saturdays and was so conventional a figure that Timmins expressed his doubts that Luckhurst might be remotely likely to abscond on being approached by a policeman about something so nearly respectable as bigamy. 'He just doesn't seem the type,' he said to Dodson. 'Not with a wife and a kid and a house on mortgage.'

Dodson renewed his confidence with a half-truth. 'He may be involved as a principal,' he said. 'For a start, until you told me I didn't suspect he himself might be married. So I'll come up and interview him anyway. Today, if I can book a flight.' This was action, something to do, facts to uncover. Luckhurst didn't sound a man—as Bradley had said—on the point of emigrating to Australia, needing a divorce from Ursula. There was a faint lightening of the depression in him. 'I'll check on BEA and telephone you back.'

In De Mora's absence he spoke to Chief Inspector Fowler, asking successfully for time off to attend to some urgent personal affairs. Then he did some more telephoning, first booking a seat on Flight BE 4086 leaving Heathrow at ten past four that afternoon, returning the same day at seven thirty-five. It was the last return flight and he needed to catch it. With luck he would. He could think of no good reason justifying his staying overnight.

His next call was to the Taxation Department of County Hall, asking for the registered owner of Bradley's rented Rolls-Royce.

It was given to him as The Imperial Motor and Renting Company with an address in B Division

The manager of the company was quite happy to disclose over the telephone that their 1964 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, complete with air conditioning and a driver, had indeed been rented to a Mr J Luckhurst of 26 Godolphin Grove from seven-thirty to nine-thirty the previous evening and that the driver was available for questioning should Detective Sergeant Dodson decide to call himself immediately. After assuring the anxious manager there was nothing apocalyptically wrong, Dodson chose to speak to the driver on the telephone, being unwilling to risk a certain visual identification as Bradley's passenger.

The driver was quite definite and deferentially helpful. Mr Luckhurst, he said, had been a shortish stocky gentleman wearing a knee-length camel-hair overcoat with a narrow-brimmed tweed hat. He described him accurately as accurately as he described Dodson himself as the additional passenger he had picked up at the rear of the Royal Fountain Hotel. A very large gentleman, he said, wearing a dark grey overcoat and looking very down, whom he had later heard raising his voice angrily at Mr Luckhurst. He had left the car in Long Newton Street, slamming the car door as if he were still terribly angry, not waiting for him—the driver—to do it for him. He had dropped Mr Luckhurst at the Central Taxi Rank. Where, in fact, he had originally picked him up at his telephoned request.

The manager, taking over, supplied the additional information that he personally had never seen Mr Luckhurst and that his deposit and renting charges had been paid to a clerk in quite genuine five-pound notes.

Dodson left it at that, assuring the manager that he need worry no further—that he, Dodson, was satisfied that Mr Luckhurst was not the man he was interested in nor the Rolls-Royce the car originally sought.

Bradley the devious bugger, Dodson swore, giving Luckhurst's name and the detective's own address. But, perhaps, too devious. In Dodson's experience, consciously clever buggers often made mistakes. He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. He had time to follow it up.

Before leaving for B Division he should have telephoned his opposite number there, clearing his proposed incursion on to another's territory. He didn't, although neglect to do so could result in quite serious recriminations between rival Detective Chief Superintendents and, down the line, the backlash of a departmental inquiry. And the last thing Dodson wanted was attention drawn to his activities.

Despite the cold weather, business was sluggish in the taxi world. An auxiliary bell had been installed in the café opposite the rank to allow the cabbies to drink coffee and eat the proprietor's sandwiches while they waited for trade.

Dodson was able to display Bradley's Photofit mock-up to seven of them bundled around the fire. He made a hit immediately. One of them recognized the photograph as that of a man he had picked up from outside a telephone call-box in Lampett Street the previous evening, returning with him to the taxi rank. He hadn't seen him after that, the evening having been cold and dark, making it necessary for him to check in for a warming drink at the café. None of the drivers had returned Bradley to Lampett Street.

For what he had to do next, Dodson would rather have waited for darkness but the flight to Manchester was an urgent consideration. Lampett Street was long and the site of blocks of concrete and glass flats mislabelled mansions and courts, its pewter-grey length made residential by the planting of trees, naked and gaunt now in the scything wind.

Two telephone kiosks stood together on one corner where Dodson parked his car. Bradley could have telephoned from either and, he considered, more than likely used one as a point of reference for being picked up and set down by the taxi. He checked their numbers. One was 2328X, the number he had dialled in contacting Bradley after their first meeting. He had not checked it before, not believing it important.

He felt exposed and vulnerable to being seen either by Bradley or a divisional detective, but there was little choice. It would be the rankest bad luck were he to be seen now. And, he thought, he had already overdrawn on his share of that.

Inside the hall of the fourth block of flats—Elmlea Court—he found the small white card for which he had been searching. It was one of a long column of similar cards with accompanying bell-tits. On it was typed *Mr W Bradley. No 18*. There was no porter in evidence. An unattended lift waited further inside the entrance hall.

When the lift jerked and began rising he left hurriedly, moving into the shelter of the side of the building to the alley at the rear of it. There was no ground floor door at the back but an iron escape ladder, ending abruptly ten feet from the ground, gave an exit in the event of fire from a door in each of the ten floors. He intended getting into Bradley's rooms and an alternative line of retreat was something that could prove necessary.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HE MADE HEATHROW by three-fifteen, dropping his car at the East Gate entrance car park and boarding the Viscount without delay. He had drunk two large brandies as a tested and tried panacea against caring about air-sickness. In the forty-five minutes of window-staring and cigarette-smoking it took to reach Manchester Airport, he had renewed his crawling hatred of the deserting bigamous Luckhurst. Without ever having seen him he loathed the image he had built of him in his mind.

The sight of sad Manchester beneath the starboard wing didn't help him. Dirty grey cottonwool clouds hung over streets already lit against the deepening dusk. The greasy runway was a dark river of slush in a waste of decaying snow and the Viscount slithered queasily and lumbered on it like a runaway lorry.

A big fat man wearing a plushy tan overcoat and a tight-fitting green cap with only a vestigial peak intercepted him in the concourse and introduced himself as Timmins. That he had been immediately recognized didn't surprise Dodson. Policemen recognized each other like cats in the night, polarized towards each other with unembarrassed certainty.

An official CID car waited outside and Timmins drove him direct to Platt Lane Division police station. It was accepted practice that Timmins should now offer the facilities of the host force for the furthering of Dodson's inquiry, sparing no effort to see that he was adequately accommodated and fed and looked after, that the object of his inquiries should be made available to him.

Dodson wanted none of this and faced the awkward task of disengaging himself from Timmins's hospitality without either offending him or provoking his suspicion. Detectives tend to work in mutually-protective couples and most feel comfortable that way. Dodson's own preference was for aloneness. For his projected interview with Luckhurst it was a necessity. There must be no witnesses.

He told Timmins that he was authorized—should the circumstances suit—to offer Luckhurst the opportunity of turning Queen's Evidence and that a witness might be embarrassingly involved in the event of Luckhurst refusing it. To Dodson it sounded feeble and wet but Timmins accepted his explanation politely enough and without question. Dodson explained also that time was against him and that he would make his own way back to the airport without calling at Platt Lane. He

accepted, however, the services of a uniformed driver and a panda car equipped with an identifying revolving blue light.

At six o'clock with only minutes to spare, he was waiting in the panda at the entrance to Farcet Fen Road, the driver standing outside in the darkness with his red-lensed lamp in one gloved hand having received instructions to stop any white Rover 2000 turning into it

It did so at six-fourteen by Dodson's repeatedly-checked watch and halted obediently at the constable's signal. Dodson alighted from his car and stared at the man he knew already to be Luckhurst from Ursula's description.

He was pleasantly-featured and good looking in a rakish black-moustached way with an honesty in his expression that surprised Dodson, imagining as he had someone weaselly and shifty. Although, he reminded himself, an honest-seeming handsomeness was a common attribute of womanizers, an engaging manner a basic in obtaining a woman's confidence.

'I'm a detective sergeant,' Dodson said, neither naming himself nor producing his warrant card. The uniformed constable was his brief for identification as a police officer. 'I'd like to speak to you before you return to your house.'

Luckhurst looked from Dodson to the waiting constable and for a second there was sick fear in his eyes. 'Noth... nothing's happened to Susan? To Jeremy?' The fear hadn't been for himself.

'No,' Dodson assured him. He held his regard. 'You are James Philip Luckhurst?'

He nodded, licking his lips.

'I'm making inquiries about a form of marriage entered into by you in Kuwait.'

There was a moment's staggered silence and Luckhurst's mouth dropped open. He reached forward dazed and turned the ignition key, killing the engine. He tried to say something and failed, gaping his shock. Then he got it out. 'Oh, God! You... you're arresting me?'

'I want to talk to you,' Dodson nodded his dismissal at the constable. 'In your car if you've no objection.'

Luckhurst unlatched the passenger door for him and Dodson walked round the bonnet of the car, climbing in. Tobacco smoke clogged the closed-in air. Luckhurst had placed his pipe on the parcels shelf as if smoking it had suddenly become unendurable. In the switched-on yellow glow of the interior light his face looked muddy beneath the traces of the deep tan still remaining.

Dodson banged the door shut and settled in the seat, beginning to feel he was lately spending too much of his professional life

interviewing and being interviewed in cars 'You were expecting to be seen about this?'

'Christ no! I thought it was all over and forgotten '

'But you brought it up '

Luckhurst looked bewildered 'I don't get you '

'I think you do Hadn't you better let your wife know you won't be home for a bit?'

Dodson took in the whole of this man who was his legal brother-in-law with a policeman's unblinking scrutiny Luckhurst's overcoat and suit had been expensively tailored, the watch on his wrist an upper-bracket Rolex Executive success was written all over him His teeth were still white and without fillings, his hair dark brown and cut with what Dodson regarded as a fornicator's contrived shagginess, curling around his ears and shirt collar in a way only a woman would appreciate Dodson made no attempt to conceal his antipathy

Luckhurst appeared dazed and made motions to leave the car Dodson put a restraining hand on his arm 'Where do you think you're going?'

'To tell my wife '

'Not that way She'll want to know why you came home at all Telephone her Just say you'll be late' He was peremptory 'Nothing else '

Luckhurst wordlessly started the engine and reversed out of the road He seemed stunned

'Head towards the airport,' Dodson said, 'and stop at the first call-box you see '

While Luckhurst was in the kiosk making his call, Dodson searched hurriedly through the parcels shelf There was a *Senior Executive* electronic calculator, suggesting Luckhurst's importance in his firm's hierarchy It contained little else his driving documents, an unopened polythene wallet of tobacco and the day's *Guardian* But nothing more to tell Dodson about his character and habits

When Luckhurst re-entered the car, Dodson asked him, 'All right?'

He nodded 'I told her I had extra work at the office' He turned on the motor 'You said something about Kuwait, sergeant '

'Yes' He indicated the ignition key 'Switch it off and stay here It'll do as well as anywhere else.' Luckhurst had halted the car in a bus layby, well away from the nearest street lamp 'I'm inquiring about your marriage to Ursula Jane Dodson in October, 1965, and your subsequent desertion of her' His voice was hard as frozen rock He had difficulty in maintaining an evenness of temper A pulse throbbed in his temple This was the bastard who had put Ursula in the family way, deserted

her, and then sicked Bradley on to him. He must be wondering what had come unstuck.

Luckhurst put the tips of his fingers to his lids, screwing his eyes. 'I'll be frank, sergeant. I did. I can only say it was a mockery of a marriage—not one I could respect.'

'Go on.' Dodson felt the ice-coldness of rising anger touch his skin.

'I can only plead guilty. There isn't anything else.' He looked ahead through the glass of the windscreen, the lights of a passing car throwing deep shadows across his features. To Dodson, he looked defeated.

'There needs to be,' the detective said harshly. 'We haven't started yet. Tell me the details.'

'Certainly.' Luckhurst appeared surprised at Dodson's antagonism. He hesitated. 'But don't you think I should see a solicitor first?'

'No.'

Luckhurst shrugged. 'I don't suppose it'd do me any good. I'm finished anyway. My marriage... my job.'

'What about Urs? Miss Dodson? Are you equally concerned about her?'

'The circumstances were different.'

'Why? Tell me how you came to get married to her.'

'I met her—she was a Section Officer in the WRAF then—in Kuwait. In the Persian Gulf. We fell in love—I suppose you could call it that, at least I did—and after we'd known each other for a few months we were married by the British Consul in Kuwait. An impulse thing really although I was quite happy about it.' He was brooding on the pictures he could see in his recall of the past. 'At least I was until she told me she was pregnant.' He compressed his lips. 'That's when I took off.'

'Took off?' Dodson glared at him. 'Because she was pregnant?' He wanted to grab the lapels of the soft luxurious coat and smash his head against the side of the car. 'What sort of a thing is that to do?'

'You don't understand, sergeant. It couldn't have been me.'

'Liar.' Dodson felt the cold wind of fury again and his fists clenched as he fought against his need to smash the man. The lie made Ursula promiscuous.

Luckhurst put his fingers on the handle of the door. 'I don't have to stand for that, sergeant,' he said evenly. 'You're asking me to tell you about my marriage and I am. I happen to be sterile.'

'Sterile?' Dodson choked back on his anger. 'You aren't damn well sterile now, are you? You've a child.'

'Jeremy.' He took his hand from the door. 'We adopted him.'

That's something you can easily check on Don't think I'm impotent,' he said defensively, 'because I'm not Ursula and I did our thing together long before we decided to marry It just so happens I had a once-and-for-all vasectomy when I was kicked in the balls playing rugger'

'And you told her?'

'No I should've I suppose But it wasn't anything I wanted to shout about So when she tried to lumber somebody else's kid on to me, that finished it The implications were terrible Something I couldn't stand or live with I was already in trouble with British Petroleum so I pushed off to Muscat and got myself another job'

He drifted into silence while Dodson thought about it He shied away from considering his sister's deception of him 'What was the trouble with British Petroleum?'

Luckhurst grimaced 'I didn't pinch the petty cash if that's what you're expecting Don't think me immodest, but you've heard of Potiphar's wife?'

'Let's stick to the bigamy, Luckhurst'

'No' There was an area manager's authority behind that 'It's right I should say it You asked me why I left BP and I'm going to tell you One of the Chief Engineers brought his wife to Umm Qusr That's where I was working A bloody stupid arrangement even if she did have stringy arms and dyed hair, Outside the oil installations there was little else but sand and camels and bot-flies and hung-up men who had to travel all the way into Kuwait if they didn't fancy camels This woman was the only female in the camp and she loved it I suspect her husband hadn't dared leave her behind in the UK on her own Unfortunately she made a dead set at me Being a bloody unscrupulous bitch it suited her to pick on a newly-married man—and a happy one then—and not on any of the young studs there who were walking about with their tongues hanging out and only too ready to oblige Her husband was very much a stuffed-shirt prick and it didn't take her long to put the boot in I suspect she told him I was trying to get her into bed with me—the Potiphar's wife touch—and the stupid old sod believed her' Luckhurst was regaining his natural composure, occasionally using a humourless half-smile against the continued hostility of Dodson's expression He retrieved his pipe from the parcels shelf 'You've no objection?'

Dodson shook his head 'It's your car.' He looked at his watch. six-forty Even without counting the quarter-hour check-in time he had only fifty-five minutes

Luckhurst held a match to the tobacco he hadn't finished 'That's the story She put the poison into me with her husband. What she couldn't have she had to spoil. Whoever it was,' he said

around the stem of his pipe, 'who wrote about hell having no fury like a woman scorned knew his stuff I was as good as finished with BP from that minute You couldn't blame them, I suppose. Nobody would want a sex-crazy engineer running loose on an installation as remote as Umm Qusr Particularly lining up on the boss's wife Of course I could have had it out with her old man, put the finger on her promiscuity But that was something I couldn't do Even had I wanted to I'm not sure the old idiot would have believed me So when I realized Ursula had been having it off with another man—to give her a fair crack of the whip, obviously before we were married—I just took off for other parts I returned to the UK three years ago, made some pretty pointless and hopeless inquiries to trace her and then gave it up as a bad job I met Susan and you apparently know all the rest' He turned down his mouth 'If all that isn't an excuse then I haven't got one' He hesitated 'How did Ursula find out about me?'

Dodson stared at him, 'You really don't know?'

'No, or I wouldn't ask'

'Somebody complained about it'

'Well? Who? I'm entitled to know'

'Your friend Bradley might know the answer to that' Watching the other man's eyes closely, Dodson could have sworn he looked completely uncomprehending

'Bradley?' He wrinkled his forehead 'Who the hell's *he*?'

'You probably know him by a different name' He fumbled in his pocket and drew out the two prints of the Bradley composites He flicked on the interior lights and handed the photographs to him

Incomprehension remained on Luckhurst's handsome features 'These two are of the same man?'

'Yes He should be recognizable in either'

'I'm supposed to know him?' He gave Dodson back the prints

'Yes' Dodson's face was grim

'Well, I don't I've never seen him before in my life'

'What about this Chief Engineer of yours at Umm Qusr? The one with the uninhibited wife'

Luckhurst looked surprised 'Bradford? What about him?'

'Allowing for the fact they're mock-ups, he's nothing like the photographs?'

'Good God, no He's in his middle sixties by now He's a wizened little character with a walrus moustache and a stuck-out gristly nose You don't think he'd'

'No' Dodson put the composites back in his pocket He was satisfied to have narrowed the field of possibilities 'I just have to be sure Something else, Luckhurst I've been checking at Australia House I understand you're in the process of emigrating'

'Emigrating? Are you mad?' Luckhurst looked bewildered 'This is like a nightmare Bradley . Australia . why should I want to emigrate? You're sure you aren't confusing me with somebody else?'

'Not while you're the man who married Ursula Dodson in Kuwait'

'Then I don't understand I honestly don't'

There was a silence in the car while Dodson read him with calculating eyes, recognizing again the obvious honesty of the man, deciding he'd prefer to believe him than Bradley. It was a time for disclosing something of his own involvement 'You knew she had a brother?'

'Ursula?'

'Yes'

'Isn't he a policeman?' His eyes widened 'Christ! Not you! You're Harry?' He saw the answer in Dodson's face and he suddenly looked hunted, licking his lips 'I'm sorry . . I wouldn't have said those things had I known. This is why you're so angry with me'

'You think I should be pleased? That my sister should be treated like a tart?'

Luckhurst spread his hands helplessly 'She wasn't one I don't sit in judgment on her. But it honestly wasn't my child'

'You don't know what happened to it?'

'No'

'Or care?'

When Luckhurst didn't answer, he said, 'It was aborted. Then she tried to kill herself'

Luckhurst grimaced his anguish 'Oh, God! I'm sorry I really am. I didn't know'

'You know now'

The handsome man was beaten and resigned 'I admit I did wrong. I did wrong to marry my wife Susan. I can only do what I can to put things right. But I . . I can't go back to Ursula'

'No, you can't. She wouldn't want you to. Do you know where I live?'

Luckhurst was puzzled 'In Manchester?'

'No.' Dodson was satisfied with the other's reaction to his questions and firm now about who he believed. He checked his watch again 'Let's go,' he said 'I've to get to the airport before seven-thirty'

Luckhurst switched on the motor and swallowed. Dodson could almost smell the sweating defeat in him 'You're taking me with you?' He pulled out from the kerb, changing up through the gears as the car gathered speed

'No. After you drop me there I don't want to see you again.'

Ever Go back to your wife and forget you ever saw me As I will you' He regarded him sombrely 'I was going to break you into little pieces'

'I deserve it' His fingers tightened on the steering-wheel.

'Not for that For what I believed you'd said to Bradley'

'Will you believe me? I don't know this Bradley. I have never told anyone about Kuwait I'd have been a bloody fool to have done so'

'Well, don't now If I can help it, it won't go any further than me'

Luckhurst sucked in a deep breath, then exhaled it His fingers trembled on the wheel

'Thank you'

'For Ursula, not you,' Dodson said harshly, unforgivingly 'I still think you're a bastard and should be charged You've deserted one wife and misled another You're nothing very special in my book.'

'Will you tell Ursula I'm sorry'

'No'

Believing Luckhurst—and he had to—brought him back to accepting that she had been promiscuous It hurt him like the ache of an extracted tooth He felt she had somehow betrayed him She had lied to him He wondered why he had believed her so completely when his whole experience and instinct was so much against believing anybody completely He knew himself to be a fool in thinking a woman wouldn't lie to her brother Or to anyone else if it suited her purpose He tried to make himself curse her but couldn't And her dishonesty didn't affect the need for his continued protection of her He wasn't sure now whether it was Ursula or Bill he was most concerned about

He didn't speak to Luckhurst again When the car was stopped outside the entrance to the departure lounge he climbed from it and waited stone-faced until Luckhurst was out of sight.

There were no ifs and buts about the detective's future now He knew he had stepped irrevocably over the line of criminality By knowing of Luckhurst's bigamous marriage and concealing it, he was unlawfully conniving at the offence That he had done similarly for Ursula might have been mitigated by his immediate relationship There was less reason for his doing so in Luckhurst's case

That he had been lied to about Luckhurst by Bradley was no surprise Luckhurst had never been involved with him in blackmailing Dodson Bradley was on his own, having unconsciously demonstrated to Dodson that the transition from policeman to potential murder need prove neither lengthy nor difficult Dodson knew it remained only for him to find and destroy the documents

incriminating Ursula and he might be driven from potential to actual; for the first time admitting to himself that he could be pushed into killing Bradley. He began considering how, if he was, he might do it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HE WAS BACK in his apartment at nine-fifteen, checking in his wire cage for mail. There was none and he called the Headquarters number, asking the Duty Inspector if he had been inquired after. He was anxious to know whether Ferris or De Mora in particular had sought him. Only, he was told, a Mr Bradley, who had left a number to be called. Dodson didn't want it and said so. His cold, uninviting rooms were more than he could stomach, and he shut the door on them, taking with him the tissue-wrapped bottle of whisky he had bought that evening.

He dropped his car in the shadow of a steel-girdered bridge overhanging waste ground two streets behind Penkhull Street. The Siberian chill had given way to a warmer air mass drifting in over the black water of the docks and bringing with it a thickening mist. The roofs of tall buildings merged amorphously into a soft vaporous indigo while, below, cars laboured like blind beetles behind the diffused golden dazzle of their headlights. Sounds were blanketed and muffled and pedestrians loomed like formless giants. Pin-point diamond droplets bedewed Dodson's coat and silvered his hair and eyebrows.

He followed his cautionary drill of the previous evening, checking out doorway recesses and parked cars, moving inconspicuously and silently for such a big man.

The windows above the ironmonger's shop were in darkness and he hesitated on the top stone step, lifting his watch to inches from his eyes and reading the time. The blank closed door was shining damp with mist. He twisted the handle and opened it, stepping inside quickly and closing it noiselessly behind him.

The door at the top of the stairs was locked and he tapped his knuckle on it. The silence behind the varnished wood was the unbreathing vacuum of an unoccupied room. He found the switch to the small fly-specked bulb that filtered a dribble of muddy ochre light down the stairs.

A previously unnoticed tabby cat sat with its paws folded in front of it in one corner, watching him from slitted eyes, showing no fear. Dodson sat on the top stair and the cat stretched itself, opened its mouth in a pink sharp-toothed yawn and jumped lightly on to his lap. He scratched the fur behind its ears and lit

a cigarette, listening to the purring of the cat and the small creakings and tickings of the silent building

After his second cigarette he unwrapped the bottle of whisky, screwed off the cap and drank from its neck. He considered reasons for Morag's being out, his suspicions feeding on his need for her. Jealousy brewed a greenish-black bile in him and soured his stomach. He couldn't imagine her being out with anyone and not being slept with.

When he heard the quiet swish of rolling tyres and then the banging of a car's doors he stood, putting the cat gently on to the floor. He capped the bottle and rewrapped it in the tissue-paper.

Morag entered first, showing surprise at the light being on. The man with her was tow-haired and thick-lipped, his sallow features vaguely familiar to Dodson. He frowned when he saw the detective standing above them. That he recognized him as a policeman was clear.

He said to the woman, 'Who is he, Lil?' He looked the same breed as Christou and possessed a similar tough arrogance.

She didn't answer him but stared up at Dodson with dismay in her eyes. She wore her fur coat and her attractiveness brought a suffocating tightness to his chest. But he cursed her in his mind for a whoring cow, tomming it around with a man who looked as much a slag as had Christou. That she had been promiscuous with he himself and he had not refused her because of it did not occur to him. Women were only promiscuous with other men.

Dodson ignored her companion, speaking directly to her, his face wooden.

'I'm sorry, Miss Grey. It obviously isn't a convenient time for me to see you and I'll call again.' He was conscious of the haze of tobacco smoke above him, suggesting to anyone seeing it that he had waited there some time. He stood motionless while they climbed the stairs.

'It's quite all right,' she said, her face as uncommunicative as his, responding to his deliberate formality. 'Will you wait?'

The man with her scowled. 'No, he won't,' he grunted. 'I'm not aiming to leave yet. Not while he's here.' To Dodson, he said, 'I know you. You're the bloody law. What are you doing here?' He was truculent and swaying on the balls of his feet. A fat yellowish cigar burned between his finger and thumb.

Dodson treated him as if he didn't exist. 'It isn't anything important,' he said to Morag, his eyes never leaving hers. 'Perhaps some other time.' His expression said *No time ever*. She would need to explain to the man with her why a detective sergeant would be waiting to see her at ten o'clock at night and he was willing to leave her with all her options open. From the distrust

in his face, the man was going to need some convincing explanations

He was impatient with her 'For Christ's sake, Lil, let's cut the cackle and get in' He lowered his eyebrows at Dodson 'Beat it, copper,' he said 'The lady's busy' He seemed to be trading on the detective's superficial mildness misreading the latent aggression in him and his face's indication of a willingness to use it He was trailing the hairiness of his masculinity in front of Morag and Dodson recognized it

He turned and laid a chilling stare on him 'You're acting like a ponce to me Don't push me into proving you are one' It was a calculated challenge to the man's goading and it needed a violent reaction from him not to lose face

Against the power and ruthlessness emanating from Dodson, it never came The man sneered instead 'The pissballing law All you bastards can do is to hide behind your fucking warrant cards' He drew in fiercely at his cigar, dropping its ash over the front of his overcoat and moving from one foot to another

Dodson smiled tightly 'I left it in my other suit So don't let that worry you either' When nothing came he turned and left them, hitting the treads of the stairs hard with his heels He was saying to himself, *The slings and bloody arrows of outrageous fortune Christ! Shakespeare didn't know the half of it* And yet he recognized an inevitability about it, a pattern of continued wretchedness that left him unsurprised at what he considered a heavenly malevolence

Outside in the mist-shrouded street he stopped at the soft-top cream coupé parked at the kerb and felt the bonnet with an ungloved hand It was warm and he read the number plate, memorizing it for a later check The man's physical familiarity bothered him

He heard the outer door of the flat opening and Morag ran down the steps She caught his arm as he moved away 'Harry! Please' Her eyes were anxious and she lowered her voice

That alone infuriated him That she cared about the man in her room hearing her He looked down coldly at the ringed fingers holding his sleeve and spoke loudly 'I'm in a hurry And shouldn't you be getting yourself ready for that pimp you came with?'

'Harry sweetheart I didn't expect you tonight . '

'So I imagine.'

'You said you would be away ' She faltered, seeing the implications of her words She jerked her head nervously, her glossy black hair swinging against her cheeks

'I did, didn't I,' he said grimly 'So you made a bloody fool out of me ' He moved a few steps but she followed

'Harry!' There was desperation in her voice 'You don't understand'

'Understand!' he shouted 'Of course I understand! First you shack up with a toad like Christou So that was your own business Then I come along and you suck me in Telling me you ' He cleared his throat harshly, unable to say the words, ' bloody stupid nonsense anyway Five minutes later you're shacking up with another toad you must have dragged out of a cess-pit ' He waved his arm in the direction of her windows, hoping the man could both see and hear him 'So that makes it my business and so far as I am concerned he can have you' He choked on his jealousy, unable to express himself nastily enough The thought of her being possessed by another man produced a wildness in him He could smell her perfume Its intended use for the stimulation of the man in her room was asafetida in his nose

She bit her bottom lip, taking some of its whitish-pink paste on her teeth 'That's a horrible thing to say, Harry'

'I feel horrible It must have done your image good to have a copper's skin nailed to your bedroom door'

She wore a blue velvet band in her hair and this made him even more furious because she looked lovely and vulnerable and innocently schoolgirlish in it He wanted to hold her in his arms and apologize abjectly for what the bitter twisted man inside his skin was saying Almost anything to be able to get back into the warm cave of her affection And because this was a conflict in him it added fire to his fury

'You came to see me,' she said sadly, 'and I wanted you to '

'I'm sure you didn't ' His face burned at the recollection of how she had used him and he was brutal 'It so happened I was duty stud for the evening Good for a fuck as you'd put it So now you've got some fresh action in your bedroom ' Her face paled and she looked shocked

'Get off my bloody back, damn you' he threw at her

'Harry I'd already arranged to see him we only went '

'I'm sure you did,' he interrupted 'And now finishing up in bed'

'That isn't true Please come back He isn't staying Really he isn't' She was coaxing him, her green eyes pleading 'Please believe me.'

He thought of Ursula and her lying, of the man waiting up there for Morag No bloody doubt, he swore masochistically to himself, with his trousers already off He yelled at her to drown out the thought of it 'I've had a gutful of believing women of being lied to'

'I love you, Harry' She said it simply as if it answered everything

I love you, he mimicked her in his mind, needing to convince himself he was right *She'd have said the same thing to that stinking pig Christou* He was tight-faced, conceding nothing but wondering how much more punishment she was willing to take He saw the movement of a curtain at one of the windows of her room 'Save it for him up there,' he said brutally He was trembling, his hatred for himself a gnawing worm He was a bent copper and the dirtiest thing he could think of Something even pigs will like the man upstairs would be entitled to spit on But for all that he thought he was, he couldn't stomach her usage by these two men

He removed the whisky bottle from beneath his armpit and held it out to her

Surprised, she took it

'That's your whisky back,' he said 'Get the bastard loaded on that Now I don't owe you anything'

'Harry' She blinked, her eyelids suddenly brimming tears

He glared at her, a shadow of madness in his eyes, making soundless movements with his lips Then he said, 'For Christ's sake leave me alone,' turning away from her, leaving her standing forlorn and alone on the pavement

Neither of them saw the darker mass of a watching figure behind the windscreen of the car further up the street, an inconspicuous nondescript car that had followed the cream coupé, coasting behind it noiselessly

Back in his own rooms, Dodson flung his coat to the floor and poured a whisky with shaking fingers Then he fumbled unsteadily with his record player, switching it on and selecting the aria *Vesti la giubba* from *I Pagliacci* He turned the volume up full bore and Canio's heartbroken sobbing thundered in the cheerless room, finding its echo in Dodson's own despair Before it had finished, he drank another whisky And another, staring numbed and uncomprehending at the plaster wall on whose other side somebody was banging with his fist a protest at the noise

When the bottle was empty he stood swaying on rubber legs and threw it shattering against the cabinet of the record player, the fragments bursting outwards like glass shrapnel

'You cow! You bloody cow!' he yelled, not clear whether he meant Ursula or Morag or realizing that the two women had merged together into a chimera of sexual promiscuity in his drunken mind

When the drugging effects of the alcohol wore off, the nightmare began. He experienced bizarre moon-shadowed landscapes and sinister streets peopled with freakish men and women he thought he knew but who mouthed words at him he couldn't understand

His most intense sensation was one of utter aloneness and isolation with a background of hopeless melancholic depression.

He ran, directionless and motiveless with fear dragging his heels, pursued by two beings who were mere attenuated flickers of occasionally seen whiteness behind him. He knew without seeing them clearly that his shadowers were Ferris and De Mora, robed and hooded like inquisitorial familiars.

Once he saw a pale and anguished Ursula flitting from one darkened window to another and behind her a pursuer that was first Bradley with an orange-coloured pipe in his mouth and then Christou. Shapes dissolved and Bradley lay beneath him and he was digging crooked thumbtips into the soft tissues of his throat with the little man smiling politely and saying, 'I want to be your enemy, Harry. IneedyouIneedyouIneedyou,' his face melting and reforming horribly into a fur-coated, perfumed Morag arching her loins against his, her face dark purple and her green eyes bulging against the pressure of his thumbs, crying, 'Iloveyou-HarryIloveyouHarrysweetheart'.

He awoke then with a frenzied yell to lie sweating and trembling, his heart hammering the fear carried over from his dream and haunting the darkened bedroom, his waking no relief but only an awareness of an oppressive reality. He switched on his bedside lamp and smoked a cigarette, worrying at his problems and coming to decisions.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DETECTIVE CHIEF INSPECTOR FOWLER was apparently absorbed in the view from the window of Dodson's office when he arrived. The view was of bird-limed grey roof slates, television aerials and the distant skeletal structures of cranes black against a dirty white sky. It wasn't remotely impressive and Fowler must have viewed it to stunning boredom from the windows of his own office. Yet he was beaming gently, seeming to be reacting to it as another might to a Corot or Constable painting.

Dodson had a headache that aspirins had failed to numb. Morag was on his mind like a fleshy incubus, carrying some of the weight of his fretting that had previously been wholly Ursula's. But the strain of the past few days had cut new lines in his face, had given his eyes a haggard, animal-wary look. He wasn't surprised to see Fowler. The inevitable crunch had been longer delayed than he had expected.

Fowler smiled at him with a practised creasing of his eyelids. It meant nothing, gave no clue to what he was about to say. He

would smile if he ever had to pull the trapdoor lever at an execution. He believed in and used amiability and chumminess for all occasions. He was an unnerving man to accompany to a force funeral. As with most humorous men, nobody ever really knew what he thought.

'You look shagged, sergeant,' he said genially. 'Bleeding to death from the eyeballs.' He bared his chalk-white plastic teeth. 'And you'd better put on your bullet-proof jacket. The guv'nor wants you in his office on the trot.'

Ferris, in contrast, was wholly official, his narrow face severe, his hostility plain. The slate-grey eyes measured him up, doing a computing on his external appearance. His 'Good morning, sergeant' was worse than nothing at all. He kept Dodson standing in front of his desk, a man arraigned for judgment and sentence, while he capped and uncapped his pen with restless fingers, considering his next words. The cuffs of his shirt were immaculate and not yet dirtied by the day's grime, the early morning smell of aftershave and deodorant strong on him. The air was heavy with a foreboding of trouble.

A tape recorder stood on his desk, a glowing ruby light showing it to be live. The grilled microphone head, poised on a slender S-shaped neck like a striking snake, had been propped on a green cloth-bound copy of *Archibold's Criminal Pleading, Evidence and Practice*.

Dodson regarded the microphone head pointedly.

'That's a tape recorder, sergeant,' Ferris said coldly. 'You object?'

'Are you going to caution me as well?' He was being treated as a suspect for something or other without any face-saving attempt at concealing the fact. Ferris must feel himself in a strong position.

'Don't be bloody-minded, sergeant.' The hawkish face was flinty. 'I wish to ask you questions I consider necessary. The tape is to complement my note-taking. Possibly it will assist you as well.'

Dodson jeered at that in his mind. Ferris must believe him soft in the head to imagine he'd accept that. 'I'm sure you're right, sir,' he said with heavy irony. He was reacting to the hostility he could sense as strongly as he smelt the aftershave. The alchemy of Bradley's villainy had transmuted Ferris from a colleague into an enemy.

Ferris fingered down a switch on the machine and the tape spools started revolving slowly. Without preamble, he asked, 'Where were you yesterday, sergeant?'

'Christ!' Dodson thought. *Luckhurst or Morag*. Aloud he said, 'Specifically, sir.'

'After you asked Mr Fowler for time off.'

'I had personal matters to attend to'

'Where?'

'Manchester'

'Oh?' Ferris looked surprised but Dodson guessed he already knew the details of his journey if not the reason 'How?'

'I flew'

'What about?'

'I said, sir Personal business'

Ferris cocked his head, his expression deliberately doubting 'Nothing to do with a force inquiry?'

'No'

'You're sure?'

Dodson frowned 'I'm quite sure'

'It's embarrassing for you to tell me what?'

Dodson's skin felt gritty as if underlaid with grains of sand, his nerve-ends raw He was in no mood to react subserviently to Ferris's prodding questions Although the phrasing of them was unobjectionable, the Chief Superintendent's disbelief in asking them was exacerbating Dodson said tartly, 'No more than to tell you how many times a day I pee But it's still my own business'

Ferris frowned, tapping his pen on the desk His cream-blond hair looked a touch more ruffled than it had at the beginning of the interview He glanced at the humming tape recorder and decided against an equally tart rejoinder 'As you wish, sergeant At what time did you return?'

'I caught the seven thirty-five flight back,' he intoned as if giving evidence in a court, 'arriving at Heathrow at eight-twenty I returned to my rooms at nine-fifteen and immediately checked by telephone with Inspector Horsefield to see whether I was wanted I wasn't'

'And then?' The eyebrows were lifted in cool enquiry

The bastard knows, Dodson cursed to himself *Somebody's told him about Morag* He felt pregnant with a heavy weight pulling down at his stomach He said, 'I had more personal business to attend to'

'Connected with the business you had in Manchester?'

'No, sir'

They were undisguised prosecutor and accused now with Dodson undergoing the inquisitorial probing of the witness stand

'Did it take you to forty-seven Penkhull Street?' Ferris's eyes were unblinking on Dodson's, watching for the faintest twitch of indecision in answering

'It did' Dodson got the words out just

'The apartment of a woman called Lily Grey?'

'Yes.'

'The woman you arrested with Christou?'

'Yes'

'Arrested because you believed she might have been concerned with Christou in disposing of stolen property? And with concealing the commission of an arrestable offence?'

'Yes'

Ferris took a small blue notebook from a drawer, opened it and flattened it on the desk on front of him. Dodson recognized De Mora's writing filling the pages 'I told you this woman Grey needed watching?'

'Yes'

'You weren't watching her?' Having already established Dodson's being on personal business the question was confirmatory, not interrogatory. With nearly thirty years of interrogating prisoners and witnesses behind him, Ferris knew precisely how to prepare the ground in order to produce the answer he wanted.

Dodson was being reduced to a monosyllabic agreement 'No,' he said.

'Or watching her flat?'

'No'

'Well, it shouldn't surprise you to know that Mr De Mora was. But watching her in particular.'

Dodson sucked in his breath sharply as if Ferris had slapped him in the face. He felt cold.

Ferris referred to the notebook 'Bear with me, sergeant, but I want to get this on the tape so there's no dispute about what I say.'

'Why should you anticipate I'll dispute what you say?' Dodson was aggressive, irritated at the implication that he would wriggle and deny anything at a later date.

Ferris didn't trouble to answer him. 'Mr De Mora commenced observation on the woman Grey at five o'clock last evening outside her apartment in Penkhull Street. At five forty-five a taxi called for her and she left in it unaccompanied. Mr De Mora followed the taxi to the offices of Kornfeldt and Mulready, solicitors of Spatching Street. She paid the taxi off and remained in the offices until eight-ten, leaving accompanied by a man who was later identified as George Christou, brother of Leopold Christou . . .'

Dodson was unable to conceal the small lifting of his eyebrows in surprise and Ferris, seeing it, stopped. When the detective remained silent Ferris said, 'Um' as if the silence was significant to him. He continued, 'They entered a Triumph Vitesse coupé RHR2H parked outside and Christou drove it to this Headquarters.' He looked at Dodson again but he had stoppered down his surprise. 'Christou asked to speak to an officer connected with

his brother's case, specifically excluding Detective Sergeant Dodson. He paused again.

This time Dodson said, 'I'm still listening.' He had inoculated himself against any further surprises

'You knew?'

'Of course I didn't. But nothing that filth like Christou says or does would surprise me.'

'Well, by this time Mr De Mora had entered by the rear of the building and being told this went to the Public Inquiry Desk and introduced himself to Christou. The woman already knew him, of course. Both Christou and the woman produced statements prepared under the instructions of Mr Mulready. Even countersigned by him. They were both questioned by Mr De Mora without departing in any particular from the statements they had made to Mulready. Christou's statement gives his brother an alibi for the night of the Symes job. You knew this?'

A dull flush coloured Dodson's neck. Ferris obviously suspected he was in some way privy to Christou's councils. 'Of course I didn't know.' He spaced his words out evenly with harsh emphasis. 'If I had I would have told you. The man's a bloody liar anyway.'

'So he might be, sergeant.' Ferris was allowing himself to be nettled by Dodson's own unrelenting hostility. 'But we haven't finished yet. The woman's statement was one she might have made on the night of the wounding of her boy friend.' He really meant had she been handled properly in the first place. 'In brief, it purports to detail what happened and why.'

'Why?' Dodson echoed him. 'We already know why.'

'Do we, sergeant?' Ferris pushed his chin at him. 'Sometimes I have serious doubts.'

'Well, I don't.'

Ferris thinned his lips. 'The woman doesn't agree with you. Apparently Leopold Christou had been making himself unpopular with one of the local gambling fraternity—she won't say who, naturally, being who she is—because he owed him a considerable amount of money. His brother George supports this as you'd anticipate. They admit freely enough the gambler sent a couple of strong-arm debt collectors to get the money. Which they got. I understand Leopold Christou has made a similar statement to the prison authorities and thus we'll get today.'

'I'm sure we will. The very neat way it's all tied up stinks of Mulready.'

'Please let me finish and don't interrupt, sergeant. You may or may not be surprised to know that it's going to lose us Christou from the Symes case. Your identification won't stand on its feet for five seconds.'

It had started. the twisting of facts, the falsification of evidence,

the outright lying and the legal chicanery, the conspiracy between lawyer and accused to pervert and defeat the ends of a flaccid milk-and-water justice. Despite his own troubles, meeting its blatancy once again still rasped him to despair. And that cow Morag had gone along with them. His skin chilled at the thought of her bamboozling him, leading him along by the nose like a besotted mooncalf in rut.

'If you say it won't,' he said woodenly. 'But what they and Mulready have cooked up is a load of crap.'

Ferris's face was suddenly red and he slapped a flat hand on his desk, jumping the books on it. 'Of course it is!' he bawled, his held-back anger at Dodson released, the obscenities of his earlier days finding new expression and forgetting the tape recorder. 'You don't think I believe them, do you? But it sticks like shit on a blanket, sergeant. What else can we expect when you balls up a job like you have this one. When you start dipping your prick into dustbins.' He made a noise in his throat, noticing Dodson's haggard face, catching a glimpse of the man's suffering. He quietened his voice, bottling back his choler. 'Listen to the rest of Mr De Mora's report. After Christou and the woman left Headquarters he continued following them. Christou drove direct to Penkhull Street and entered the apartment with her.' He regarded Dodson broodingly.

The detective made his face even more impassive, armouring it against the verbal blows he was taking but in his mind visualizing a naked Morag making whorish love to the cigar-smoking Christou. The bloody woman haunted his mind like a succubus, flooding it with prurience and ruttishness. He came back to Ferris, who was speaking.

'... Mr De Mora, remaining in his car, from which he was able to hear voices coming from the house.' Unconcealed distaste was on his face. 'It won't surprise you, sergeant, to hear that he recognized one of the voices as being yours. Then you appeared in the street outside, obviously in a highly emotional state.' That, to Ferris, seemed as heinous a crime as consorting with criminals. 'You put your hand on the bonnet of Christou's car, apparently waiting for the woman to join you.' He eyed the rotating spools. 'I don't think we need go into the details,' he said, his aristocratic nose wrinkling its disgust, 'except to say that your conversation—unpleasant in the extreme and unbecoming a police officer—indicated to Mr De Mora a degree of sexual familiarity with the woman that throws serious doubts on your integrity and impartiality in this case.'

Dodson's face burned, recollecting the words he had used. *A copper's skin nailed to your bedroom door; duty stud for the evening; good for a fuck, as you'd put it.* Christ! he groaned to

himself As I put it, not her De Mora had heard the lot and it was all there on paper for the top brass to dribble over He took a deep breath 'You misunderstand the situation My friendship with Miss Grey has nothing to do with either of the Christous Admittedly I arrested her with Christou but the charge was a dodgy holding one and was refused in any case That doesn't make her a criminal and any association I have with her is neither necessarily improper nor unlawful'

Ferris stared at him, started to say something lashing but remembered the tape recorder and said instead, 'Miss Grey is a woman of known immoral character'

Dodson cut him off in mid-sentence 'She is not' He said it but couldn't believe it He was really defending himself

'Don't interrupt me' Ferris glared at him, something that didn't show on the tapes 'I said of known immoral character and I meant it Having it off with Christou and God only knows how many other studs with records in the Crotch. You expect me to accept her as someone for you—the detective sergeant in charge of a case in which she is concerned—to have any kind of an association with? Least of all a sexual one'

'I'll take up the seven stations of contrition,' Dodson said recklessly, 'if that'll satisfy the bloody Police Regulations'

Ferris reached out and flicked the tape spools to a standstill 'Don't get insolent with me, sergeant,' he snapped angrily He was spoiling for a fight as much as Dodson and as equally frustrated at being thwarted from it by the discipline of his rank 'Up to a point your love life is your own and you can screw your way from Piccadilly Circus to Manchester and back for all I care But when it involves a bloody woman who's an associate of thieves and gangsters then it's no longer your own business She's a scrubber, sergeant,' he said with angry deliberation 'Probably with about fifteen different sorts of *Staphylococci* crawling over her And you're a cock-happy bloody idiot for letting her involve you with a load of right slags' He made a gesture of despair at the white-faced furious Dodson and softened his voice 'I've known you for a long time, sergeant You've never gone in for women At one time I'd have bet you lost your equipment in an accident I respected you as a first-class skipper I recommended you for promotion less than a month ago I've trusted you to the limit, let you run the Crotch very much in your own fashion' He wagged his head 'I'd want certifying to trust you after this Or to respect you' He tapped his fingertip on the desk for emphasis 'Ever since you got that so-called anonymous tip-off about Christou this inquiry has stunk like a dead dog' He made his voice reasonable 'Would you like to tell me what's at the back of it all? I'd like to help you if I can'

Dodson jerked his head at the dead microphone. He resented being taken for a fool. Once convinced that Dodson was corrupt, Ferris would sink his teeth in until they met in the middle. There would be no help for Dodson from him or any other police officer. And, in his fierce justice-orientated integrity, he didn't want it. 'Switch that thing on, please,' he said. 'I want what you're saying to me on record.'

Two spots of colour appeared over Ferris's cheekbones. 'When I choose to, sergeant. You are being deliberately offensive and I wish I knew why.' When he received no reply, he said, 'All right, we'll have it on and finish Mr De Mora's report.'

He started the tape moving and referred to the notebook. 'Mr De Mora reports your leaving in the same emotional condition after giving the woman a bottle. When you had gone she re-entered the apartment and Mr De Mora remained outside until Christou left.'

'What time did he leave?' he asked thickly. He hated himself for asking but if he had to suffer he wanted to be able to flog himself with barbed wire and not soft string, wanting now to justify the rightness of his judgment of Morag as a promiscuous bitch.

'Ah, yes.' Ferris went through the motions of checking the notebook. He thought he saw the point of Dodson's question. 'Eleven minutes,' he said. 'Then Mr De Mora followed him to his house in Perrivale Avenue.'

Eleven minutes! Dodson blinked, the nails of his fingers cutting into his palms. He wasn't hearing the rest of Ferris's words. He saw Morag's sad and forlorn face again and he felt bitter shame. He had crucified her and spat in her face and had done it in front of that rubberheeling bastard De Mora. He'd heard her reviled with words like scrubber and *Staphylococci* and now there was no real justification for them or his insane jealousy. He wanted to eat dirt in atonement. No, not dirt but dung. Dirt was too good for him.

Ferris's voice came through, thin and distant. 'Are you all right, sergeant? You're not looking well.'

'I'm all right,' he said tonelessly. He wanted it over and done with.

'As you wish.' The momentary sympathy fled. 'Do you want to make any comments on what I have told you?'

'No.'

'You appreciate I must now report the substance of this interview to the Deputy Chief Constable and that it is within his authority to appoint an Investigating Officer to inquire fully into your association with this woman?'

'Yes.' So much had happened to him it wasn't really touching anything that mattered. It was happening to a Detective Sergeant.

Dodson who no longer existed, who had been hammered into a target for villainy and abuse and rank suspicion and who was now about to do something about it. He remembered Morag's asking him if he felt sorry for himself. He did. And he had to be for nobody else was.

'Three days ago, sergeant, I asked you the name of your informant. You then refused. . '

'No I didn't. I said I didn't know. That I didn't have a name to give you.'

'Are you prepared to give it to me now?'

'Even if I knew I wouldn't.' The refusal salved a little of his conscience for he knew without question his informant had been Sams. What he couldn't be certain about was whether he would have turned him over to Ferris were he not being manipulated by Bradley.

Ferris was apparently prepared to accept that. 'Right, sergeant,' he said, his voice formal. 'I have no option about this. Nor, indeed, do I want one. I have the authority of the Deputy Chief Constable to remove you from the Hooper and Christou inquiry. You will turn all your papers and exhibits over to Mr De Mora. You will not contact either of the accused men or any witness—including Miss Grey—directly or indirectly.' He made it sound like a Papal Excommunication. 'You understand that?'

'Yes.' That hadn't surprised Dodson either.

'You have some leave due to you?'

'Yes.'

'Take it now.'

'Is that an order?'

'No. Some advice. You aren't very far from being suspended. If there's the slightest whisper you are disobeying my instructions you will be.'

Dodson came to his decision. It was a small suicide but it would give him back some of his integrity and backbone. Not much but enough to carry him along to what he had to do.

'You don't have to bother about any of that,' he said. 'I'm resigning.'

Ferris blinked his eyes in surprise, then thought out the implications for himself. There seemed none he couldn't cope with and he said, 'You realize what you're doing? That you'll be finished with the police service? Not just this force?'

'Yes.' He was forcing his words out through numbed lips, feeling as if his eyeballs had been injected with acid. He couldn't imagine not being a copper. It had become as much a function of his being as eating and sleeping. But now it was done and he wanted to get away from anything reminding him of what he was losing.

Ferris inverted the corners of his mouth. 'I'm sorry, sergeant, I

really am. I wouldn't try and dissuade you because I think you're doing the right thing under the circumstances. The decent thing. Something you have to do yourself.

Dodson had an insane desire to laugh. Ferris sounded as if he were ensuring his orthodox correctness on the tape for the police archives. Fifty years ago he'd have loaned Dodson a revolver and one round, telling him not to get blood all over the harnessroom floor. And the way Dodson felt he'd probably have taken it.

He said, 'Can I go?'

Ferris nodded. 'Let me have it on paper, sergeant. Straight away.' He picked a file from his in-basket, dismissing Dodson by the withdrawal of his attention.

Throwing twelve years of police work down the drain had been as easy as that, Dodson thought on the way out. As easy as pulling a vein out of his thigh. And not much more painful.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HE RETURNED to his office, already composing the bitter words of his resignation in his mind, wanting to lash out in a self-mutilating frustration. A Telephone Message Form on his desk said that a man had telephoned inquiring for him, leaving the cryptic information that 'Charlie' had called to say that Aladdin's Cave was full. Dodson looked at it uncomprehendingly for a second or two before remembering Tull and his promise to turn in Billy Hann. He hesitated, then put the piece of paper in his pocket.

He uncased his typewriter and rolled in a report form. He typed policemanlike with his two index fingers, banging hard on the keys.

To The Chief Constable

From Detective Sergeant H J Dodson

Subject Resignation

18th January

I herewith submit my resignation from the force to take effect Friday 16th February

(sgd) Detective Sergeant

He pulled it from the machine and signed it with an unsteady hand. It wasn't much of a document with which to end his police career. It needed, he thought blackly—and nearly got—a fifty-page report with observational endorsements by De Mora and Ferris. But the Chief Constable would want no more than the words with which Ferris would choose to amplify the report; words damning him beyond redemption, killing him stone dead with official but

emotive phrases like 'character deterioration', 'known criminals' and 'an unfortunate sexual association', all prompting the Chief Constable to endorse his resignation *Accepted*. It had happened so often before with policemen involved with typists, secretaries and female witnesses, needing no elaboration to underline the potential danger in what he and Ferris would choose to see as a tomcat itching of genitals in a profligate police officer.

He folded the report into an envelope, addressed it to Ferris and marked it PERSONAL & CONFIDENTIAL, tossing it into a clearing basket together with the ignition keys of his borrowed car.

Then he cleared his desk, pushing all his personal papers into a brief-case. They included his collected material on Bradley. He took the framed photographs of his Training Squad and Detective School class from the wall and cased and locked his typewriter. His actions were automatic as if somebody remote punched buttons and activated movements in him.

He went to the CID General Office and collected the Exhibits Room key from its nail, signing his name in the exercise book accompanying it. The key was attached to a wooden block large enough to prevent its being put into the user's pocket and forgotten. Dodson checked that his Symes exhibits were on the shelf where he had placed them, the oxygen cylinder, the bag of tools, the loaded magazine of bullets and the Luger automatic. He initialled the identifying labels on them and the day's date. Correctly, he should hand them personally to De Mora but it was a refinement of evidence he was going to ignore. The Detective Inspector—witness to his boorish display the previous evening—was somebody he couldn't stomach at that moment.

He stood on a tea chest of stolen silver plate and pulled down a dust-covered flat leather box from a top shelf. Inside was a mutilated double-barrelled 12-bore shotgun. The barrels had been shortened to less than six inches, the wooden butt sawn off and replaced by an aluminium hand stock, making the weapon into an easy concealable and murderous pistol. With it were some red-cased shot cartridges, the brass caps dulled from months of storage. Intended as a Black Museum exhibit, the weapon had been shelved and forgotten. Dodson stuffed it behind the waist band of his trousers. He put the cartridges in a pocket and returned the empty case to the shelf.

When he was finished he looked around the impersonal walls of his office, already, it seemed to him, shed of the emanations of his personality. He said goodbye to nobody. None would yet know of his resignation. It would give Sergeant Cavey something to chew on when he saw the barren cleared-out desk, the missing typewriter and the pictureless walls.

He rented a bottle-green Morris Mini from a garage near the Headquarters building and on his way back to his apartment purchased whisky and a stock of cigarettes. Future cirrhosis of the liver or cancer of the lungs seemed benign evils set against the more immediate worries pressing down on him.

In his room, he moved the small dining table near enough to the telephone handset for him to be able to rest it on one end. He made the table his desk, opening up the typewriter and placing its lid, as if carelessly, behind it. Beneath it he concealed the shotgun and cartridges, standing a heavy dictionary on it as a final assurance of its innocence.

He sat at the table and typed out a note to Mrs Butler, telling her not to come in the following morning. He knew he was doing most of this to occupy a mind that seemed to possess a demonic need to mull with squirming persistence on his humiliation and the reason behind his stealing of the gun. Once he detached his mind from the minutiae of time-occupying chores he would have either to go on the whisky or fall into the waiting dark hole of dejection and despair and bloody anticipation.

He telephoned Ursula. Non-exposure had made her no happier. She answered his call as if suspecting it to be from the Devil himself.

'Bill's in the garden,' she whispered. 'Is everything all right, Harry?'

'So far.' He was cool towards her, remembering her deception of him about Luckhurst. 'Our Armageddon has yet to come,' he joked grimly. 'But I have to see you.'

'Oh, Harry! Please.'

'Can you get into Norwich?' He checked his watch. It would take him about three hours steady motoring to get there. 'Say at about three-thirty.'

'I think so. Where?'

'I don't know. It's where you live now. Choose where you're not likely to be seen by any of Bill's flock.'

She sounded helpless. 'You mean like a restaurant?'

'No, I don't,' he said impatiently. 'I've got to be able to find it easily. What's your most prominent building in Norwich? Apart from the cathedral which must be the last place we can use.'

'There's the Castle Museum. If you come in on the A11

'I'll find it.'

'There's a rotunda. A sort of central hall. I don't think anybody would recognize me there.'

'You be there and I'll approach you. Not you me. It'll be all right with Bill?'

'Yes. I can borrow the car. I say I'm shopping or something.'

After he'd replaced the receiver he chewed on his lip. His

feelings towards her were ambivalent, his blood relationship a strong pull, his real affection for her warring against his knowing of her promiscuity, her lying to him. Part of his policeman's mind was insisting on the justice of her being punished for what she had done but realizing it would also fall without pity or discrimination on Bill and the children.

He dialled the number Bradley had left with the Headquarters switchboard operator the previous evening. A woman answered and he asked, 'Who's that speaking?'

She countered by quoting him the number he had dialled. Her voice was cool and distant and irritating.

'I dam' well know,' he rasped at her, 'having just called you. I want to know who I'm speaking to.'

'Who do you want, please?' She said it briskly like a big man's personal secretary and very sure of herself.

'I want Mr Bradley.'

'Will you give me a number he can call and a time.'

Dodson wanted to tell her to go to hell but discourtesy seemed of relative unimportance to him now. He gave her his unlisted number and said he would be at it for the next hour and no longer. Then he repeated his question irritably, 'Who are you?'

She said, 'I'm sorry,' to him in the tone of voice reserved for chronic cases of halitosis and disconnected. He hesitated about calling Directory Inquiries, deciding against it. Bradley was no doubt being clever and devious again. That he already knew where the small man lived was enough. He also thought he was adding up to someone he should soon be able to identify.

He was still making up his notes when Bradley rang him. 'Harry!' he said without preamble in the voice Dodson now hated. 'I expected you to call me last night.' In his polite way he was cracking the whip over Dodson's hindquarters.

'Be bloody glad I'm talking to you at all, Bradley.'

'Try and keep in touch, Harry, I worry.'

'You should worry now.'

'Oh?' Bradley sounded concerned. 'Has something happened?'

'You stopped having me on your books about an hour ago. I've resigned.' chucked in.

There was a silence and all Dodson could hear was the humming of the unused line. When Bradley spoke his voice was high-pitched and querulous as if he'd been unexpectedly kicked in the groin by an old friend. 'You were asked for it?'

'No. My conscience reached the point it should have reached several days ago.'

Bradley's voice sharpened. 'You haven't been stupid enough to mention me.'

'No.' Dodson cut across his words contemptuously. 'Don't panic.'

'I'm not, Harry And if I do, only for you I'd like you to consider retracting it'

'No It can't be done Even if I wanted to You ballsed things up for me with that imbecilic business of handing over Christou, Bradley They're happy to see me go and I can't blame them'

'It doesn't sound all that bad, my dear fellow' He was more cheerful 'I certainly wouldn't consider you redundant because of that'

'That's generous of you,' he said bitterly 'Well, listen to this I'm finished with the service I can't be of any use to you now, thank God Not being a bloody civvie' He wished he could believe it

'But you can, Harry That's what I wanted to speak to you about That little project of ours'

'Of yours, not ours And I can't get you what you want I have no access I've left the office for good'

'Harry!' There was mockery in his voice. 'You don't really think I'd let you break up our friendship that easily do you?'

'No, I don't,' the detective said wearily He was suddenly tired of sparring with him Bradley was right. Escape didn't come that easily It might have to come in the form of an ounce of lead pellets from the barrel of the stolen shotgun and that was sometime in the future The possibility had been with him so often during the past two days that he could consider it calmly and without distress 'When do you want me?'

'This evening? At eight?'

'Where?'

'Ah! I'm not sure yet Would it inconvenience you to wait at your end? I'll give you a call at eight to say where'

Bradley the clever bugger, he thought 'I've some business this afternoon and may possibly be delayed You'll have to give me some leeway'

'I can make it later, Harry, if you like'

'No' That didn't suit him at all He needed Bradley away from his flat 'Eight's better because I also have an appointment later on'

Bradley was doubtful 'You seem a busy man for someone who's resigned'

'You don't just drop everything and walk out, Bradley I've job sheets to clear,' he lied

'But not to go back to your office?' He wasn't too happy about that

'I have no office,' Dodson said tightly 'Don't labour the point'

'All right, Harry You're going to tell me exactly why you resigned?'

'No'

'I'm sure you'll reconsider that when you've thought about it'
Urbanity wrapped the threat in politeness

Dodson didn't bother to reply

Bradley said, 'All right, Harry Believe me, I'm sorry about your resignation It must mean a lot to you It's the last thing I would have wished on you'

The hypocritical little bastard was making it sound as if he meant it, Dodson thought He said, 'Why don't you and my late Chief Superintendent get together and cry on each other's shoulder'

He dropped the receiver back on its cradle and scowled at it He'd lose that soon, its being a force installation As well as his Warrant Card and notebooks, his truncheon and handcuffs, the personal issues of Force Orders and Instructions. In return he'd get a month's salary and allowances less any deductions the bloodless bastards in the Finance Department thought they could get away with and the repayment of his pension contributions. The Chief Constable would give him a Discharge Certificate assessing his service conduct somewhere about the non-committal 'Fair' or 'Good' mark instead of the 'Exemplary' his work and conduct—unadulterated by his submission to Morag's sexual aura—would have earned him His resignation report would be added to his dossier and the folder relating to his service life tied together with white tape and filed away in the Dead Section of Personnel Records He felt it to be a chilling burial for a live Detective Sergeant more suitable for the near dead man his resignation had left behind

He poured himself a large whisky to anaesthetize the feeling of utter nakedness and to stoke the glowing coals of his hatred for Bradley that cauterized his stomach

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HE SAW URSULA apparently engrossed in the examination of an exhibit of blue and white porcelain in a glass-fronted case He studied her for a minute or two, seeing the pale washed-out face and the anaemic oatmeal-coloured hair somehow lost under the wavy-brimmed felt hat The swollen disfigurement of her pregnancy bulged beneath the loose tweed coat, making her legs appear thin in the big country-tramping shoes she wore She had taken on the protective colouration of a rural churchiness Even the large leather handbag she carried slung over her shoulder seemed designed to carry Churchwomen's Guild minute books and attendance sheets Dodson couldn't recognize in her the sexual magic that had, in the past, attracted other men to her

When she saw his reflection in the glass of the case, she turned and smiled at him. It was the sort of smile used at funerals and the palest thing he had ever seen, coming from a face that was empty and depleted of emotion.

He squeezed her arms briefly and touched his mouth to her cheek. She smelled of talc and lavender toilet water and babies.

She searched his eyes anxiously. Looking, he thought, for the sort of miracle she would ever only read about in Bill's text-books. She saw the answer in his unsmiling face.

He looked around him. The octagonal rotunda in which they stood was crowded with coffee-drinkers and bun-eaters. 'Too many people here,' he said. 'Where can we go?'

She bit her lip in hesitation then led him through one of the doors leading from the rotunda to a gallery containing wall-cases of tigers, lions and other carnivores. There were few people doing more than passing straight through to other galleries and Dodson chose a bench near a case displaying an ancient stuffed polar bear doing horrible things to a varnished seal forever bawling its agony.

They sat and he put his brief-case at his feet, speaking to her in a low voice. 'First of all, how is Bill?'

'It isn't working out, Harry. He suspects something dreadful's happened.' She gave a distraught twist of her face meant for another smile. 'I believe he thinks I've fallen out of love with him or . . . or have a lover from his congregation.' She clutched at his hand convulsively. 'It's him I'm worried about, Harry. Not myself. You must believe that.'

'I'm worried for him too. And you, Urs.' He used the diminutive seldom. Her obvious distress moved him to it now. 'You look dreadful.'

'I deserve to, Harry. He doesn't.'

'No,' he agreed, 'he doesn't.'

'Harry. I wanted to tell Bill. But it isn't only me, is it?' She looked down at her swollen stomach.

'No.'

Her fingers were trembling as she picked at the stitching of her gloves. 'It would kill him, Harry. I know it would. He's put me on such an impossibly high pedestal . . .'

'I wouldn't know.' Nor would he. He had never experienced the kind of love Bill would have for Ursula. Or wanted to. His need for Morag was already too much of an emotional bond for him to be comfortable with.

'I've seen him praying in his study, Harry. His dear face so anguished about me, I know. In some queer way he's blaming himself for whatever he thinks it is.' She squeezed his fingers again. 'Harry, that's not like Bill. Not in his study.'

'He's not asked you if there's anything wrong?'

'Yes' Her face softened 'Things like, "Is everything all right, dear?" and "Is carrying the baby worrying you?" I say "Everything's lovely" and he smiles and talks about something else. But he has this sort of vacant expression when he's supposed to be reading or writing letters and I know he's thinking he watches me, Harry, trying to get the answer from my face. torturing himself And me too' There were ragged tendrils of hysteria in her words and the glint of tears in her eyes 'What does this man want? Is it money?'

A passing woman, hearing her raised voice, peered at her curiously

'Not so loud,' he warned her 'If it was money you could never buy him off He wants nothing,' he lied 'Just the twisted sort of satisfaction a man like him gets from other people's suffering And letting them know he knows' The word blackmail would have been too emotive a noun for Dodson to use in describing what was happening All Ursula's anxieties were so far canalized on her husband She wasn't suffering for her brother.

'And James?'

'He's not concerned in this at all He's said so and I believe him'

'You've spoken to him?'

'Yes' His expression was blank, showing nothing He had already decided against making an issue of the fathering of the foetus she had aborted 'He's married again and I've left him to it'

She looked faintly surprised

'What did you want me to do,' he said fiercely. 'Jump on his face?'

Tears glinted again 'No, Harry, of course not I forgive him for everything he did'

'You misjudged him,' he said implacably At least he'd make that plain for Luckhurst

She bit her bottom lip, accepting it humbly 'All right, Harry He knows about me?'

'No' Dodson thought she would be feminine and paradoxical enough to still wish he did, to know of her marriage and children, to know that she wasn't concerned about his desertion of her 'He's a decent bloke, Ursula, if I read him right He knows nothing of Bradley or his approach to me.'

'Then how did this man Bradley find out?'

'That's why I've come to you You've got to help me by trying to remember not getting emotional or modest about it I want you to think of all those people who would have access . . . to know of the details of your service career, your marriage, your abortion, your . . . this other stupid thing you tried to do'

She looked all bloodless helplessness 'It's so difficult, Harry . . . so many years ago . . .'

'No it isn't,' he said firmly 'Your Commanding Officer knew He held a Board of Inquiry into it Who was he for a start?'

'Group Captain Blackwood He's dead, Harry'

'You know for sure?'

'I read it in *The Times* Saw his photograph'

'All right This man who took the statement from you?'

'Wing Commander McCann He was Special Investigation Branch'

'You knew him?'

'No He flew out from Lyneham to see me'

'Was there anybody with him?'

'Yes A WRAF Flight Officer She was Investigation Branch too'

'You knew her?'

'No Except her name was Hogg I've always remembered that'

'You've seen neither since?'

'No'

Was there anyone else— The CO's Adjutant? Your own WRAF Commander?'

She shook her head 'I don't know, Harry Possibly'

'Not possibly, Ursula Certainly' He was impatient with her hesitation and vagueness He wanted her to be as precise as black and white He stared at her 'Bradley knows you.'

She stared back at him, startled 'He does?'

'He does unless he uses the words "Your so very attractive sister" as a figure of speech And I don't think he does So he's seen you And, as a corollary, you've probably seen him'

He placed his brief-case flat on his knees and opened it, taking out the folder of the Bradley composites He displayed the two round genial faces with the alert eyes He gave them to her 'This is Bradley The one with the hair as he is, the other as he might be without his wig Or as he might have been' He watched her eyes closely, waiting for a sign of recognition

She was looking at them, handling them, as if they had been coated with ordure 'This is him . Bradley?' she whispered

'Yes' He was disappointed at her reaction 'He doesn't ring a bell?'

She knitted her eyebrows. 'He's familiar in a way, Harry'

'Look harder,' he urged 'They aren't photographs of him Only a Frankenstein's monster kit of spare parts put together, a sort of photographic assembly of how I see him Try and look behind the face Concentrate on the shapes and general features Make him eight years younger against a different background, a different country.' He couldn't suggest too much He couldn't prompt her by saying Bradley knew more about the law than the average citizen; that he fitted in somewhere along the path of her service past Not until she'd dug into her stored memories and failed

She was silent for a long time, concentrating on the pictures, chewing away at her lips. At last she shrugged helplessly 'I can't say, Harry. It's confusing.'

'All right,' he said, taking them away 'Describe Wing Commander McCann to me.'

Her eyes widened 'It couldn't be.' She held out her hand for the composites.

He shook his head, withholding them 'No. Describe McCann first. His build?'

'Short stocky. Quite a tubby kind of man.'

'His hair?'

'He wasn't bald, Harry. At least, I can't recall his being.'

'Colouring?'

She made a small gesture of impotence 'I can't remember. But nothing outstanding. . . something in between perhaps?'

'He wore spectacles?'

'I. . . I don't think so.'

Her vagueness, her hesitations, were an irritation to him. He gave her back the composites 'Have another look,' he said, 'with McCann in mind.'

She regarded them doubtfully 'I saw him only for an hour. . . all that time ago. I was in hospital, Harry, and not very well and I'm not that good at remembering faces.'

Eight years, he thought. Nearly three thousand days and nights of trying to forget the shame and humiliation. He wondered how long an unwilling brain could carry the mental image of a man seen for a brief hour with eyes that were probably reluctant to look at him at all. Uniformed authority with gold leaves on the peak of its cap and Air Council Instructions in its brief-case. A man, an incident, he guessed, she had willed her brain to expunge from its memory. And now—just when she'd thought God was really in His Heaven and all was right with an otherwise stinking world—out it all came like spilled guts on to her nice sensible walking shoes. And, despite her mind's unwillingness, he had to force her to recall that one man's features from the kaleidoscope of the forgotten and only half-remembered faces of eight years ago.

And, admittedly, the montage of stereotyped facial segments, good as an alternative, hadn't the subtle truth of a photograph. It lacked completely the subject's personality, all his individual planes of flesh and the lines carved by experience and the years, its features necessarily conforming to an all-purpose plastic average man.

'Think.' He willed her to rise above her mind's reluctance.

'It could be,' she said at last, 'but I'm honestly not sure.'

He sensed a curious hesitancy about her and wondered if she really thought that by closing her eyes to Bradley, not clothing him

with the solidity of an identification, he would actually go away or cease to exist. He felt a sudden irrational and momentary anger at her spinelessness, wanting her to be strong and fight with him against the threat of Bradley. She was coming apart under pressure and because she was he felt exposed, an unfamiliar uncertainty moving like a jellyfish in his bowels. He took the composites from her and replaced them in his brief-case.

'You think you might stop all this, Harry?' She wanted desperately for it to be so, to believe him. 'Honestly?'

'Honestly,' he said. 'Hold on for just a few more days.' She worried him, remembering her psychoneurotic past. And thinking about that, with her sad melancholia shadowing even his own depression, the dark hole of his own troubles opened up beneath his feet. But it was more important to him that she should do nothing to precipitate tragedy for Bill and the children.

She cried gently and softly for a while as he sat with her, comforting her. That a cold-blooded thing like Bradley could cause this misery, this agony of distress, hardened his hatred towards him even more. And he was too experienced a policeman to believe any blackmailer ever relinquished his grip on his victim. It bolstered his growing intent to violence against the little man.

When she had composed herself, her eyes searched his face. 'I'm sorry, Harry. I'm selfish. It's doing things to you as well. You look ill. And you've lost weight.'

He managed a smile. 'Sisters shouldn't be so nosy. I've a very exhausting sex life with a very possessive woman. But for God's sake don't ever tell Bill.'

She also forced a smile. 'Of course not. He'd only laugh anyway and ask for her telephone number.' The tears were near the surface again.

He stood. Suddenly there was nothing more to say. 'I've got to get back on duty and it's a long way.'

She stood with him. 'Of course. I'm sorry I couldn't help you.' She kissed his cheek, turning her ugly swollen belly sideways away from him. Her eyes were pink-rimmed. 'Poor Harry,' she whispered. 'You and Bill.'

'Don't worry,' he said. 'It's going to be all right.'

She shook her head sadly. 'No, Harry. It's going to come out. I have this dreadful premonition. . . Oh, Harry, dearest. . .'

He walked with her to the entrance hall of the Castle and through the turnstile, letting her precede him while he followed her over the bridge at a distance. When she turned into the car park and was gone from his view he left, walking out into the city streets, not looking back for a last sight of her. He knew he had failed her as he had failed himself.

He need not, he reproached himself, have passed on Bradley's

threat of exposure to her, worrying her unnecessarily. Her secret might have slept undisturbed in her for ever. He could have borne the load himself—for he would have been no worse served had he—until ready to do what he now knew he had to do. Made ruthless and blinkered by the canker of revenge, he could see no other way out. Four days had changed him and he was left wondering how little beneath the surface had been his darker self, the *alter ego* that would hold him back from hitting a violent prisoner yet ignite itself in wanting to kill Bradley, the side of himself that had largely ignored women and then besotted itself over the mistress of a shoddy third-grade gangster.

Before leaving Norwich he purchased a tasteless check cloth cap and a pair of cheap imitation-hogskin gloves, both several sizes too small for him. He also bought a short steel case-opener and a cigar.

He put the cap and gloves on the floor of the car near the foot pedals where, on the journey back, the heels of his shoes would help give them the similitude of wear and natural dirtying.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BACK IN HIS APARTMENT, Dodson rested for a few minutes and drank, without consciously tasting, a large undiluted whisky. Enjoyment of things, even in the satisfying of his appetites, had gone from him. His emotional level remained for the most part at a dulling stomach-diagging depression. And this was reflected in the almost permanent impassivity of his expression, never very mobile at his happiest. A stranger meeting him would label him at first sighting a morose and surly bastard. He performed small tasks with a mental detachment and a minimum of concentration that allowed him to brood obsessively on Bradley. He was not far short of being paranoid in his attitude towards him.

Taking the cloth cap and gloves he had already maltreated, he rubbed them together until they showed realistic evidence of wear and abrasion. He dipped vegetable cooking oil into the centre lining of the cap, allowing it to form a disc that might pass for a patch of grease from the crown of the owner's hair. The cap now bore the appearance of having been worn by a not-too-fussy roadsweeper with greasy hair.

None of what he had done would deceive for very long a physicist from a Home Office Forensic Science Laboratory. But Dodson knew neither the cap nor gloves would ever be subjected to that sort of scrutiny.

He emptied the pockets of his suit of any means of identification, retaining only his cigarettes and brass lighter but adding

sharp blows from the heel of his palm. Pressing his shoulder against the door and holding the handle, he levered the jemmy towards him until the wood splintered and cracked, the door swinging open and the ruptured lock falling to the floor. He stepped in, his heart pumping, and closed the door behind him.

A clock ticked away somewhere in the unbreathing blackness and he could smell the faint staleness of Bradley's pipe tobacco. He licked his dry lips. It needed a special kind of unthinking insensitivity to be a burglar and he didn't have it. The thumb-nail blob of light from his torch showed him a pair of windows on the far side of the room. He pulled aside the curtain of one and opened it, peering out into the high wet night. A narrow ledge led to the fire escape steps. He knew he would have to be mad to consider climbing out of the window and on to the ledge but it was there if the need was pressing enough. He drew the curtain but left the window open.

Returning to the door, he knocked his wooden wedges beneath it and piled a rug against it to block off any escape of light. Then he felt secure enough to switch it on.

The room was furnished for letting and impermanence was implicit in the characterlessness of its hotel-type appointments. The lobster-paste-coloured moquette coverings, fumed oak woodwork and bulk-purchase Axminster functionalism would differ from room to room but only in minor detail. The two large pictures on the walls were reproductions of paintings of a woman with Martian green flesh and yellow horses galloping across a peanut-butter sky. The absence of a feminine touch made the room as graceless as Dodson's own. Bradley had attempted to make it tolerably bearable by the provision of a tray of bottles of liquor and a soda siphon on the sideboard. A row of paperbacks stood behind them. None was by Camus or Kafka or Schopenhauer.

He lit the cigar stub, placing the matchstick in an ashtray. He struck another three matches and added them to it. He grimaced his distaste at the rankness of the cigar and left it to burn on the edge of the wooden table. Then he moved fast, searching the room methodically and silently.

He slid out the plastic-covered index pad from the base of the telephone handset. His own unlisted number appeared under the reference D but with no indication of his name. The several named local numbers he ignored. An unidentified number under S he copied on to his cigarette packet.

In a drawer of the sideboard he found a Lloyds Bank cheque book and a Barclaycard, both printed and embossed with the name Wilfred Bradley. He riffled through the cheque stubs. They were all payable to 'Self' for amounts between £30 and £50 and

made out on dates prior to the attack on Christou. He put both articles in his pocket.

In between his searching he kept the cigar alight by periodically puffing at it, replacing it on the edge of the table each time.

In the bedroom he opened the wardrobe, searching the pockets of the only three suits in it, dropping each to the floor as he finished. There were no name tabs on the jacket collars. He examined an old Christie Wildfowl hat decorated with the green wing feather of a teal duck. Fastened to its inner sweat band were three tiny oval metal plaques bearing the initials *W A B*. A paler oval in the leather after *B* showed where one had been removed. It could only have been *M* or *Mc* for McCann. He couldn't recall McCann's initials but there would be four of them.

Wilfred something something McCann! Dodson knew that people changing their names for their own dark purposes rarely changed the forenames. He had Bradley pinned down now and nearly classified. Late Wing Commander, Royal Air Force Special Investigation Branch. The man who had investigated Ursula in Kuwait and was now using that knowledge to blackmail her brother. Dodson smiled. It was an unpleasant smile. McCann alias Bradley. A man now of known dimensions, identity and background. A man who had largely lost his slipperiness, who could now be grasped in the hands like a tablet of soap that had suddenly dried. A man more within the compass of the detective's intent to destroy. But, he cautioned himself, he had to move fast, concentrate too intently on the search to spare time mulling on an identification he had already guessed at.

He tore the linen from the bed, flinging it to the carpet, then following it with the mattress. Beneath the exposed metal springs he saw a red leather travelling case. He pulled it out, using the jemmy to snap open the locked fastenings. Inside was a long manilla envelope and a bundle of £5 notes.

It was anticlimactic that the envelope should contain a passport in the name of Wilfred Bradley McCann, born 25 10 1920. There were stamped endorsements in it showing that he had visited France a number of times. His profession was shown as Company Director and from page 3 he stared out as an easily recognizable balding Bradley wearing heavy horn-rimmed spectacles.

Dodson possessed no feeling of satisfaction at having confirmed Bradley's identity. No more than would a man in testing the strength of a rope with which he proposed hanging himself.

He noted the statistics of McCann on his cigarette packet but, despite them, he would always be Bradley to him. With the passport was a newsclipping from *The Daily Telegraph* headed 'Church Appointments' and announcing, among others, the post-

ing of the Rev W Stephens, M A, to be rector of Parr and vicar of Selsby. The other papers were identical to the photocopied statement and copy marriage certificate he had been given by Bradley and, similarly, not the originals. The original exhibits were, he considered, probably in the archives of the RAF Provost and Security Services. He could find no discharge papers for McCann nor any reference to his service with the Royal Air Force.

He counted the banknotes—there were thirty-three of them—putting them in his pocket to join the cheque book and credit card. The remaining documents he threw on the floor.

When he heard the whining rumble of the moving lift he moved swiftly to the open window of the other room, his heart banging its stimulus to action. He heard the stopping of the lift and the metallic slamming of its gate, then, carpet-muffled footfalls and the clicking on and off of the wall light switch, followed by a low exclamation of annoyance. He had the curtain withdrawn and his leg straddling the window sill when he heard the sound of a door further along the passage being shut. He looked down into the lane at the tiny foreshortened figure of a patrolling constable and expelled his stored-up breath. He re-entered the room and let his breathing settle to normal before continuing with his search.

From the bathroom he took a handsome solidly engineered electric shaver, putting that also in his pocket. He selected a used tumbler from the glass shelf beneath the mirror and, holding it delicately between finger and thumb, brushed powder on to it from the tiny phial he had brought with him. When the ghostly grey images of latent fingerprints appeared, he unrolled a length of Sellotape and placed it over the prints, peeling it off with the powdered outlines adhering to it. This, in turn, he stuck on to the square of black card, preserving the prints for later examination if he needed any further identification of Bradley as McCann. He didn't think he would but Bradley had not worn his cotton gloves for any trivial reason. Dodson washed the tumbler and dried it on a towel and replaced it. He flushed away the grains of powder fallen in the hand-basin.

He had all he needed now. Before leaving he placed the cap and gloves on a chair and retrieved the cigar butt which had now charred a satisfactory black scar on the table's edge, dropping it and screwing it to grey ash and ochre tobacco leaf into the carpet with the sole of his shoe. He wanted Bradley to believe that the intruder into his apartment had spent a full cigar's-worth of smoking time there, needing to plant misdirections in a mind that would apply itself intelligently to the identity of the thief. Bradley was the sort of man capable of

making clever deductions from any absence of material evidence usually left by intruders. One of them would inevitably include Dodson. But the detective thought he would now be led to believe he had been burgled by a smallish, match-using, cigar-smoking villain with an execrable taste in check caps and with a mind appreciating the advantages of ready cash and the possibilities in forging cheque blanks and using other people's credit cards.

Dodson had deliberately left a typical thief's chaos. Not the shambles Moriag had suffered from Sams and Doust but enough to disguise the real intent of his intrusion. Finally, leaving the jemmy to be found, he removed the wedges from beneath the door and switched off the lights. There were no signs of movement as he left and still no porter. It didn't appear that the flats owned to one.

Passing over a bridge he halted for long enough to drop the cheque book, the credit card and the box of matches into the dark swirling river beneath. He next stopped his car outside a church. A large wooden notice board bolted to its wall proclaimed the Reverend D. L. Lutterworth's unshakable faith that £2,000 would be given by the charitable-minded to replace an organ collapsing from woodworm infestation and old age. At the base of the board, made conspicuous by painted scarlet arrows, was a wide rectangular slot leading to somewhere inside the church.

Dodson pushed the bundle of notes into it and, as an afterthought, the electric shaver. Even were the Reverend Lutterworth to report the finding of the shaver to the police—possibly even the unbelievably munificent gift of £165—it would go no further, for Bradley wasn't remotely likely to advertise his loss.

He checked his watch as he ratcheted the handbrake on at the entrance to his apartment block. Seven minutes past eight. He felt again the almost tangible current of another intelligence watching him as he methodically locked the car doors, then walking across the pavement towards the steps rising to the entrance.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DODSON entered the door, shutting it and stepping immediately to a narrow window at one side overlooking the street. There were shining-wet cars lining each kerb but none in which he could see any movement. The sounds of footfalls and the muted thumping of music came from the rooms above him but otherwise there was silence. Then a figure crossed his line of vision to mount the steps.

He flattened his shoulder-blades against the plaster of the wall behind the door and waited as the handle turned and the door opened cautiously

The crew-cut leathery Sams stood there, looking around uncertainly for direction. When he saw the row of brass-framed tablets displaying the names of the flats' occupants he went to them. He was wearing his white stiff-skirted stormcoat, the few spots of rain glistening on the shoulders indicating he had been watching from a car or from the shelter of a doorway. He reminded Dodson of a sinewy hyena with a disfigured muzzle and screwed-up ears hunting for something dying to eat. The sharp smell of the embrocation he used like a deodorant reached the detective's nostrils, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. They were two men who would hate each other even sharing the same womb

'Are you looking for me?' Dodson asked from behind him

Sams twisted around fast, the beginnings of a startled snarl baring his teeth

'Ah! Sergeant Dodson!' He exhaled his breath, hissing between his teeth. He wasn't intimidated by the monolithic grimness of a Dodson appearing twice his size in the shadow of the door. He spoke as if to a subordinate. 'You're late. Mr B's waiting for you.'

Sams wasn't serving Bradley well by rasping at the detective's sensibilities. He exhibited all the abasive arrogance of a man not objecting to countering a resentment to it with violence.

Dodson remembered Sams's telephone call, the sneer about his being a bent copper. All his bitterness against being used, against his being spoken to like a hired hand by a thing like Sams erupted into aggression. He moved swiftly to the crew-cut man, facing him squarely and jabbing a stiff forefinger hard into his chest. He spoke with his teeth together, pushing the finger for emphasis, wanting Sams to object, provoking the violence he knew underlay the arrogance. His other hand he kept hanging loosely at his side, balled into a ready fist.

'You tell Bradley if he wants to speak to me he'll know where to find me.' He wondered at Bradley's control of the man that he hadn't before tried to settle the score outstanding on his wrenched finger and his humiliation at the detective's hands in front of Doust. And now being poked belittlingly in the chest.

Sams was stolid and unmoving, not reacting, not moving away from the jolting finger. Which, Dodson recognized, made him a good man at fighting when he had to be. And, despite their previous encounter, utterly confident.

'Mr B won't like that at all,' he said, his eyes glittering beneath the scarred eyebrows.

'Tell him anyway.' He felt the familiar chilling of the flesh of

his face in anger and he turned away, shouldering past him. Then, seeing the knowing sneer on Sams's bacon-and lips, imagining the contempt he must have for a copper who'd sold part of himself, he soured and let himself go. He swivelled explosively on the balls of his feet, sinking his fist deep into the pit of the surprised man's stomach, feeling the button of the stormcoat even through the leather of his glove.

As Sams's mouth opened in a gasp and his head jerked back, Dodson opened his fist and cut him cruelly across his Adam's-apple with the padded edge of his palm.

Sams might have been gymnasium-hardened and iron-bellied for the first blow but not even an ex-pug could take the second and shrug it off. He cawed hoarsely for breath with a purple face, trying to hold himself up before collapsing to a squatting position on the floor.

Now, Dodson told himself, Sams had something else to suck on his back teeth about. Even having done it, Dodson wasn't drained of all his resentment. Violence for him was much like fornicating with a strange woman. Once the lust for it had been expended, he was left with a still-demanding residue and a wondering why. He knew enough to expect violence to beget more violence, to anticipate that Sams would, when he thought fit, exact his own measure of it from the detective.

He turned his back on the squatting man and left him there. Sams was too dangerous a man for anyone to wait around until he was recovered and able to hit back.

In his room he disconnected the telephone receiver, allowing it to swing purring on its flex. He put his papers away and poured out a large whisky, sitting in a chair and waiting, refusing to lock the door because of any threat likely to be posed by a revengeful Sams. He placed his cigarettes and brass lighter conspicuously on the arm of his chair. He wanted to telephone the Yard for a name search on McCann alias Bradley but daren't risk the chance of his arriving while doing it.

After twenty minutes his door was knocked on. He replaced the telephone receiver and opened the door sufficiently to identify his caller, one shoe held firmly against its base, preventing any sudden pushing of it further open.

Bradley stood there, not quite so amiable as Dodson mostly knew him but showing his teeth from the small mouth with civilized urbanity, his shiny chocolate-drop eyes bright. Doubt, his loose mouth grinning his habitual insolence, stood behind him.

Bradley said, 'May we come in, Harry?'

'You can get rid of him first. That gorilla behind you.'

Bradley turned to Doust 'You see, Stanley,' he said reproachfully 'I told you Mr Dodson didn't like you. I think you upset him over Miss Grey' He smiled a secret little smile as if the background to the thought amused him 'Wait outside in the street, Stanley, and let me know at once if you see anyone unfriendly' He stepped inside

'Get out,' Dodson said to Doust, shutting the door in his wholly evil face He couldn't see the man without recalling what he had done to Morag And thinking about her was something he wanted not to do

To Bradley, he said 'You've considered there's a possibility I'm being watched? That there's somebody from the Department outside?'

Bradley clucked his tongue old-womanishly 'That's terrible, Harry But I think Mr Sams would have known had there been'

'Would he? Being an all-round thug doesn't qualify him as an expert on keeping observation I knew he was outside when I came in'

The little man caught Dodson's arm and squeezed it 'Don't worry, Harry What have we to be concerned about? To anybody seeing us together, I'm an old friend of yours An informant if you'd rather'

'I'd rather neither' He kept his loathing caged behind his face's impassivity 'And don't send messages to me by Sams or Doust It's bad enough I have to speak to you' He sat and lit a fresh cigarette, making a point of fiddling with his lighter, thumbing the spark lever until he saw it had attracted Bradley's attention

Bradley followed suit in sitting uninvited opposite him, unbuttoning his British Warm but not removing it 'I'm sorry you had to quarrel again with poor Robert You really do take advantage of his good nature But I understand how you feel Completely' He held his orange-bowled pipe in a gloved hand 'Do you mind?'

When Dodson remained silent, he put a match to the already-charged bowl, sucking in his cheeks as he drew on it.

The detective regarded him as newly emerged, his background as an ex-Wing Commander and RAF policeman making him a different man He had become a more formidable adversary in one way, in another, a man in whom Dodson could gauge capabilities and limitations, anticipating how he might be expected to think and react to situations He wasn't supposing Bradley had brought out from the service anything of its *Per Ardua ad Astra* When top brass like him went rotten, it usually went rotten all through and poisonous with it Dodson cursed his lack of opportunity for checking Bradley's form at CRO

Bradley's eyes were searching the room through the clouds of

smoke, taking in its almost monastic furnishings, the row of *Encyclopædias Britannica*, the typewriter, the bottles of whisky, adding them up in his mind to something that made him raise an eyebrow

Dodson moved impatiently 'I've had a hard day, Bradley, and you aren't improving it. You wanted to speak to me.'

'But of course' Bradley regarded him solicitously. 'I really am sorry about your resigning, my dear fellow. I didn't expect it to come to that. Nor want it to. Apart from its being against both our interests.' He tutted his fake concern. 'You must have brought it on yourself. . . . built this little affair into something a lot more traumatic than it actually is. Making a calamity out of a quite simple, quite amicable, arrangement of interests.'

Dodson drew at his cigarette. He desperately wanted a state of mind that could detach itself from the hatred consuming him, from the self-contempt sapping him emotionally. He felt himself to be in a nightmare of destructive fear from which there seemed no waking. And this placid, amiable-appearing little man with the civilized manners and un pitying eyes was the catalyst of it. He could see no way out of it but by the violence his training and instincts had always warned against in others. And he fought the logic of it, seeking some other solution.

He put his cigarette on an ashtray and rose, going silently to the door and opening it suddenly.

Bradley looked surprised, then smiled.

'Mr Doust is outside in the street, Harry. You really must learn to trust me.'

Dodson closed the door and locked it, moving to Bradley. 'Stand up,' he ordered him.

For a moment the little man looked alarmed and stiffened in his chair. 'Why, Harry?'

'I'm going to search you. What I have to say isn't going to be taped.' He had made up his mind and he hoped he could carry it through.

'Ah, I see. All right.' He stood obediently and held his arms outstretched, the smile back on his lips as if amused. 'I thought we'd got beyond this stage. Outside only, Harry,' he warned him benignly.

Dodson ran the flattened palms of his hands over the pockets, beneath the armpits and inside the thighs and calves of his legs. The plump warmth of the alien body repelled him, prickling the bristles of his neck hair. He compressed his lips as the inhuman feeling of wanting to tear Bradley in two, to degut him, came back.

When he had finished, Bradley said, 'A reciprocal, mutual exchange, old boy. Only fair, eh? May I?' He patted Dodson's

pockets while the detective stood silent and constrained, loathing the intimacy of the womanish hands moving over his body.

Satisfied, Bradley walked around the room, not touching anything but examining. He opened the doors to the bedroom, the bathroom and the kitchen, peering inside as if on a barracks inspection while Dodson followed sombrely behind. He returned to the living-room and lifted the telephone receiver from its cradle, scrutinizing it closely, tapping the diaphragm with a fingernail.

'You're satisfied?' Dodson asked him tightly when Bradley had returned to his chair and taken up his pipe.

'Thank you, Harry. You've been most accommodating. I really wouldn't have liked discovering another detective with his ear to a door.' He neighed a high-pitched whinnying laugh.

Dodson poured a whisky, bringing the bottle back to the chair with him. He pointedly didn't offer Bradley a drink. 'Right,' he said. 'I want you off my back so badly it's beginning to override my concern for my sister. I've taken enough crap from you, Bradley.' The strain he was undergoing and its scarifying effect on the lines of his face made his words believable.

'You don't mean that, Harry, and you know you don't.' Bradley was quite placid but his eyes were cold. He cocked his head. 'But I do concern myself over you and I admit you aren't yourself this evening.'

'No, I'm not. And stop making noises you don't mean about my well-being. Tell me what you want.'

'As you wish, Harry. This bookmaker.'

'No.'

'Harry, hear me out.'

'I don't need to. If it's old man Nancurvis.' He saw confirmation in Bradley's face. 'Oh, Christ! I was right then. Listen to me, Bradley. You're one of a long line of damned fools with his greedy eyes on an imaginary safe full of loose change.' He jeered his derision. 'It's bloody nonsense,' he lied. 'The thieves' El Dorado, fool's gold. It doesn't exist.'

Bradley pursed his lips disbelievingly, tapping his front teeth with the mouthpiece of his pipe but saying nothing.

'You didn't honestly think you were being original?' Dodson asked him.

'I bought the information in good faith, Harry. From a very reliable source.'

'Whoever it was took you for a sucker. It's scribbled all over every pub urinal for free. Misleading *graffito*.' He pushed his words hard at Bradley. 'Apart from its being an overblown fortune, there are three other reasons why you aren't going to set Sams and Doust on to Nancurvis. Number one is that he has a couple of free-range Doberman Pinschers just waiting for some-

one to put a leg over his wall Number two is he's a certificated holder of a shotgun and already on record as having shot the legs off one intruder Number three is he's chicken-hearted—always be frightened of chicken-hearted men, Bradley—and so wired up with alarms that it's impossible to get in without having access to the operational plans I can't get them now, Bradley, having resigned I wouldn't have anyway Lastly—and I can't imagine it would have stopped you in the normal course of events—it's well known that Nancurvis's wife has myocardial degeneration She's only got to smell those two gorillas of yours and she's a dead woman

Bradley had been watching Dodson closely while he talked 'I knew about the dogs, Harry They wouldn't be too formidable a problem I know about the alarming' He bared his discoloured teeth 'You'll pardon me for saying that if the job is cocked up, you cocked it up by resigning But if I can cope with the problem of the dogs, you can with the alarming system' There was a smooth edge of menace in the way he said it

'I said no,' Dodson snapped, his voice hard 'The old lady doesn't worry you?' He could see in Bradley's face that she wasn't a discouraging factor in his considerations 'You callous bastard!'

'You called me that before, Harry,' Bradley said softly 'Actually I'm terribly fond of old ladies But I also know they're usually as tough as old boots and take more killing than by being a little frightened I'm sure you're exaggerating to make your point' For a moment his face took on some of the authority he once had 'My information about his money is good and I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist on

Dodson interrupted him savagely 'You don't insist on anything I said no and I mean no Even to the extent of stopping you by warning Nancurvis' He lit a fresh cigarette with fingers he couldn't quite control and poured more whisky in his glass He crouched in the chair feeling as if he had screaming raw ulcers in his stomach He looked at a point on the wall over Bradley's left shoulder, thinking Judas Iscariot had a soft number compared with his own

'I'm going to give you something better,' he said

'Ah' Bradley settled back in his chair and beamed

'There's a right diabolical villain called Hann William Herbert Hann known as "Big-nose" Billy He's possibly as unscrupulous as shit as you You know him?'

'I know of him'

Bradley seemed to have a spongelike capacity for absorbing Dodson's insults

'I can't think of anyone I'd sooner chuck in a sewer Unless it's you, Bradley He's utter rubbish but he's big in his own par-

ticular pig-sty Perhaps too big for you to tackle' He jeered 'He's no old lady with myocardial degeneration'

'How big, Harry? And worth tackling?' His eyes were greedy but his expression remained mild 'It'll reach my expectations'

'As much as you'll ever want for that villa of yours' He was guessing but knew Hann was big money

'But *what*, my dear chap? Hard cash?'

'I don't know I've only the word that whatever it is, he's got it right at this moment He's the biggest fence in the south-east of England so it won't be old car batteries and Japanese radios'

'You think better than Nancurvis?'

Don't compare the two' The lure of Nancurvis's reputed hoard was that almost certainly it was in easily negotiable untraceable currency with no premium to pay to a fence 'Nancurvis isn't on, anyway How many times do I have to tell you?'

'All right, Harry,' Bradley said agreeably 'I've accepted that. For the time being' He smiled disarmingly 'Aren't you going to offer me a drink?'

'No Are you asking?'

'I'd be grateful'

Dodson hesitated, then rose and fetched a glass, standing it on the arm of Bradley's chair

Bradley put his fingers around it, steadying it while Dodson poured 'Thank you, Harry,' he said, beaming up at him 'Most sociable of you Now tell me what Mr Hann has that will buy me my villa'

'Platinum bars occasionally gold or silver bullion A constant supply of industrial diamonds he ships out to Antwerp .'

'Not quite the same as hard currency, Harry,' Bradley said reprovingly

'He handles that too American and Canadian dollars And he isn't honest enough to use a bank too heavily You'll have to take your chance on just what it's going to be,' he said decisively 'I can only say you'll find it profitable'

'I hope so I'm giving up a lot with Nancurvis More than you probably imagine I bought more than information I bought a dog killer and'

'Don't tell me, Bradley,' he said sharply 'I don't even want to think about what you were going to do to the dogs'

Bradley stared at him for a moment 'Ah The soft centre, eh Harry? Dogs and old ladies' His smile was as near to a sneer as he would ever get with his round ingenuous features 'So Tell me about Mr Hann who, I anticipate, possesses neither an old lady nor a dog'

'Right Listen carefully I'm not going to repeat it' Dodson read his watch 'I've an appointment at nine-thirty and I'm going to

keep it First of all, you're doing this tonight or not at all Tomorrow, whatever it is that is there tonight won't be' He waited for some objection but Bradley merely raised his eyebrows, saying nothing

Dodson continued, 'You wouldn't know what Hann looks like?'

Bradley shook his head

'He's fifty-plus and fat-gutted but hard with it So far as anyone will ever know he's a Polish-Croat Slav and has about ten last-war medals to prove he's no pushover I understand he was a dab hand at strangling German sentries with fencing wire He's five-and-a-half feet upwards and sideways, has a meaty complexion, puffy features and a big pear-shaped nose with veins like red worms in it He's clean shaven with grey hair he sometimes remembers to have tinted and wears long side whiskers He has a housekeeper who's in her twenties A hard-faced dyed blonde who's just as tough as he is She calls herself Margaret anything that comes into her mind or that suits her purpose Nobody else lives there but he might have visitors If he has, they'll be gone by midnight Hann likes his bed If you try as early as you can this evening you might find him and the girl-friend out But it doesn't happen very often so don't count on it'

He paused to relight a fresh cigarette from the half-smoked stub of the old He coughed as he did so and Bradley watched him with all the seeming anxiety of a nanny

'You should try a pipe, Harry Very much better for you'

'Yes,' he answered indifferently, 'I'll think about it The house It's in Ashmore Road—that's a cul-de-sac off the main Winsworth Road It's called Silver Birches You'll recognize it easily enough It's stockbroker's Tudor and it stands in a walled garden full of trees and rhododendron bushes There are iron gates and a big wooden door that are all kept padlocked from the inside when chummy's at home The wall's topped with broken glass, the gate and the door with barbed wire So far as we know the place isn't alarmed but you might have to do something about his telephone What you do about that, how you get into the house, are your problems I don't want to know'

Bradley nodded

'There's no house that isn't easy to get into, given the will and incentive'

Dodson looked sceptical 'We'll see The lounge is what you'll be interested in It's fitted with wall-to-wall carpeting Hidden beneath it there's a trapdoor that leads down into a cellar' He withdrew Tull's plan from his pocket and handed it over to Bradley 'Look at it So you won't need to drill holes in Hann or the woman to find the trapdoor'

'Harry, I give you my word

'That helps me to sleep at nights' He indicated the plan. 'Memorize it I want it back'

Bradley held the plan out almost at arm's length, studying it 'You need spectacles,' Dodson said pointedly

Bradley beamed 'I think you're right, Harry I am finding it a little difficult *Tempus fugit*, eh?' Then he said, 'Ah!' with satisfaction and gave the plan back

Dodson flicked on his lighter and held the flame below the paper until it was nearly consumed, dropping it in the ashtray where it was reduced to a black crisp He put the ball of his thumb on it and crushed it to a powder 'You've enough information'

Thank you, my dear fellow I shall have a look at Mr Hann's home when I leave here Case the joint as they say You have been so helpful' There was a touch of irony in his voice

'I told you before, Bradley This is where you get off my back I shall be leaving the district for good in a day or two and I want those papers The originals You have them ready for me, I take it?'

A lot of good they would be to him, he thought, with Bradley still alive to use the information any time he thought fit Bradley must believe him stupid to accept the production of the originals as an end to his blackmailing

'They're available and you shall have them, Harry When I know this is a straight job And,' he added hastily with his imitating mock concern for Dodson's feelings, 'I'm sure it is I'm just sorry that you're leaving' He must have read the smouldering dislike in the detective's eyes, for he sighed 'I wish we could have been friends There's so much nastiness in the world'

'There is' Dodson wondered, not for the first time, whether Bradley was homosexually attracted to him Nothing more he learned about the little man would surprise him 'When you've done this job, Bradley, and if you've any sense, you'll move At once I'm not exaggerating There's not only me to worry about There's Hann If he catches up with you he won't do anything so kind as to butcher you straight off He's still got a lot of the Slav about his thinking It's only his name and country he's ever changed'

'I'll be very careful' Dodson might have been warning him of the dangers of putting on damp underclothing for all it appeared to worry him

'Just so you don't underestimate him I don't personally mind you having your ears cut off But you aren't the type to fall on your own and I don't want to fall with you One thing more You'd be wise to draw off our the patrolling cars and reserves Just in case there's a slip up' His face was completely expressionless but

this was grinding his guts. It must be, he judged, how you'd feel cutting your mother's throat.

'I'd already considered that, Harry. What do you suggest?'

'A woman you can pay to dial nine-nine-nine five minutes or so before you go in on your own job. She could scream her head off about a shooting or a stabbing at the other end of town. A man to telephone from outside the town to say there's a lorry dropped on to the main London railway line, not being able to identify which bridge—something like that to draw off men and vehicles from the area you're working in. Christ!' he said, irritated by Bradley's admiring agreement. 'Don't have me blueprint everything for you.' He emptied the glass of whisky and then looked inside the glass as if somehow it had cheated him.

'That's all, Bradley. There's nothing more of me for you. Don't kid yourself you've got a permanent finger on me. I don't care whether you make a hit tonight or not. Take me seriously. If you're still around and pushing me—using the information you have about my sister—I'm going to finish it.' He smiled at Bradley then and it was a terrible smile.

Bradley blinked and looked pained. 'I assure you, my dear fellow, I would dream of no such thing.' But to Dodson the look on his small mean mouth and the coldness in his eyes meant otherwise. If the job went sour he would ditch Dodson and Ursula, even Sams and Doust, and all with the same polite urbanity, relying on his supposed anonymity to lose himself among the thousands of other inconspicuous, harmless-seeming Bradleys.

'I don't want to talk to you again,' Dodson said. 'Not to even see you. When you've done the job, send the papers to me here.' He held him with hard eyes. 'I've done my dirty share. See you do yours.'

'What about Mr Hann and the woman? Wouldn't their arrests reinstate you? If I left enough identifiable property for you to charge them with receiving?' He saw Dodson's expression and shrugged. Perhaps not, Harry. But your colleagues? I would naturally prefer Mr Hann to be behind bars. Out of circulation for at least a few days.'

'Do what you like,' Dodson said indifferently. 'If you do telephone, ask to speak to either Detective Chief Superintendent Ferris personally or De Mora. At least it won't land some other poor bopper in trouble.' He sharpened his voice. 'What about Luckhurst? You haven't mentioned him. How're you going to satisfy him about the divorce he's supposed to want?'

Bradley allowed his surprise to show for a brief moment and then stared thoughtfully into the smoking bowl of his pipe, hiding his eyes from Dodson's regard. 'Ah, yes, poor James. I hadn't forgotten him, Harry. I'm afraid I'm going to have to confess I lied

to you about him ' He gave Dodson a schoolboyish grin 'You don't have to worry about your brother-in-law He died of cholera in the Persian Gulf area a couple of years ago Unfortunately, well after your sister's second marriage Long enough after to still make it bigamy, Harry It was a small deception on my part but not one affecting the main issue, as you'll agree James left me the information just before he died ' In his lying, he smiled disarmingly, meeting Dodson's sombrie gaze with frank eyes 'Poor James A lovely, lovely man We were like brothers So you can understand, Harry, I felt a great responsibility anyway, it would have been the exposure that mattered, not the strict proving of the first marriage, would it not? But don't let's talk about an unpleasant eventuality that isn't now likely to occur Once I am out of your hair, your sister will be quite safe '

'You're being a liar as well as a blackmailer doesn't surprise me, Bradley I got the picture when I first met you ' Dodson looked at his watch pointedly and stood 'I'm sure you'll need to get organized,' he said

Bradley drained his whisky, his eyes not leaving Dodson's, and stood also He looked around the room, restrained disparagement in his expression 'Given some good will, Harry, you and I could have made a lot of money shared things' He held out his hand 'I have enjoyed our little chats, my dear boy Will you say goodbye in a friendly way?'

Dodson stared at him stonily, his jaw muscles working, his mind fumbling an obscenity that wouldn't come because there wasn't one minted vile enough to express the blackness of his loathing. He turned his back on him, staying like it until he heard the key turned and the door being closed gently after the departing Bradley

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HE LIFTED the telephone receiver and dialled 01-222 9050, asking the Yard's Crime Records for an immediate check on Wilfred Alfred Bradley McCann, born 25 10 1920 at Pangbourne He gave his own telephone number, stating he had the suspect under observation and needing the information urgently If the searching officer queried this passing of a criminal record to a private number he would, Dodson knew, check at Headquarters for confirmation This was something he was unlikely to worry about now

Then he dialled the number he had obtained from Bradley's telephone index A woman answered, he said, 'Mr Sams, please

'I'm sorry,' she replied, 'but Mr Sams is out at the moment Is there any message you would like to leave?'

He told her he would call again and pressed the cut-off studs before she could ask him questions. He dialled telephone inquiries, gave his rank and name and requested the identity and address of the subscriber owning to the number used by Sams.

Crime Records was the first to call him back and he wrote down the details as he was given them.

McCann's name was recorded as he had quoted it. His criminal background was commonplace enough. On the 31d March 1967 he had been convicted by a General Court Martial at Royal Air Force Station, Little Rissborough, of being concerned with a noncommissioned officer in the theft of electronic equipment to the value of £12,500 from an emergency landing field and with conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline in associating improperly with an airman. He had been sentenced to three years imprisonment and dismissed the service.

Dodson drank a whisky. And then another. The whisky gave to his mind a disjointed dreamlike euphoria, reducing his contemplation of Bradley to bearable limits, draining away much of his encysted hatred of him, allowing him to find it easier to swallow it like the alcohol than to keep it foul-tasting on his tongue. Its fierce burning engendered by Bradley's previous criminality was no stimulus to its continuance. All he felt he had left was the ashy sad residue of actionless defeat and the dirt of his guilt. He wanted to do nothing but get Bradley off his back, to lose him in the past, to be rid of his haunting evil shadow, his desire to kill him now bloodless. He hoped Hann might do it for him, to abort him of his original need for vengeance. His anger was arid now, dehydrated by the fierce urges prompting it.

The whisky and his emotional depletion had even bled his obsession with Ursula's problem to an anaemic fever in the background of his mind, his self-imposed agonizing robbed of its justification by his surrender to compromise.

The shotgun had been taken by another, more bloody-minded, Dodson for reasons that now seemed void of cogency. He felt the aftermath of his unthought-out murderous intent as a part of his nightmare.

The telephone bell startled him from his brooding. The address of the number he had inquired after was in Tickhill Street, the name of the subscriber listed as Frederick Hill, a tobacconist and newsagent. Dodson knew the street well. Mainly tenement buildings situated in the core of the Crotch, they climbed on the shoulders of ground-floor small businesses to progressively more ramshackle and largely unoccupied upper floors looking down on the dock area from boarded-up and dirty windows. The sort of squalid rat-holes that would harbour men like Sams and Doust. But even with these two, Dodson had lost his will to vengeance.

Insidiously growing, taking over his thinking, was the first nudge of a compulsion to confess, to unstopper the guilt that festered inside him. He could understand more clearly now the urge men could possess to admit their crimes against all their material interests, even in the face of the strictures of their lawyers. It wasn't necessarily a newborn moral honesty but more a compulsive, self-destructive need to be rid of fear and the corroding acid of guilt by exposing it for another's sharing. He felt in imagination the release, the mental relief in seeing Ferris, of unloading himself of his miserable story.

He suddenly thumped his fist on the table at which he sat. For that short period of selfishness he had pushed the problem of Ursula and Bill too far beneath the consideration of his own troubles, obscuring their claims on his continued support. He needed to forget them, not to have them crucified with him. Nothing he could say to Ferris that made any sense would exclude bringing them into it. And if he didn't, Bradley certainly would. There was no going back now and his conscience would have to grin and bear it.

His mouth was dry with the smoke of too many cigarettes, the whisky he had drunk sour in his stomach. He went to the bathroom and squeezed toothpaste on to a brush, scrubbing his teeth and staring at the man reflected in the mirror. It was with a harsh revealing clarity of vision that he saw him, observing him from the viewpoint of an outsider and not from within, peering out through the private portholes of his skull.

The man was almost a stranger, superficially with his own familiar features but with eyes made alien by moral discordances. The lids were pink-rimmed, the eyeballs alcohol-scribbled with the tiny red bacilli of engorged capillaries. A blue, hard-breathing worm of a vein pulsed in the temple. Stress had pulled the flesh down to the bony structure of the face, the lines and creases in it deeply etched. The mouth, frothy with toothpaste, had settled into what appeared to be a permanent grimace. It was a face he had seen too many times in his mirror, accepting it as his own, not bothering to read it, a lonely, solitary, rough-hewn face that depended on his dedication to his job to give it the animation of interest and occupation, its emotional responses conditioned to be masked by impassivity. Dodson couldn't remember when he had last seen it cry, when it had last creased into laughter.

It wasn't, he realized, a face remotely likely to make any woman lose the rhythm of her breathing, to make her do things to her own face before meeting it. That Morag had appeared to find him sexually attractive made him doubt her motives. He didn't question his own, needing her as much as he needed peace of mind in a release from his tormenting guilt.

Morag promised him an unsentimental, sober sympathy and understanding, she had given him the love she professed and her woman's breasts to comfort his loneliness. He frowned at his reflection, the toothbrush poised. The used breasts, the body that had been given to things like Christou. He was a dull-witted dupe. Jealousy returned, a thin green bile souring its way through his veins. Hostess to lizard-eyed sneering villains, ruttish studs from the Crotch Men—he couldn't make himself accept Christou as the only one—who had taken her. Probably without love, affection or gratitude.

He turned his mind away from its policeman's dark certainty of whorishness, its contemplation of a loveless carnality that brought only revulsion and more unease. A woman, he told the man in the mirror, could rarely be acquired with the flawlessness of an unspotted, showroom-finish new car. To believe she could was to embrace blindly an abstraction. He thought about that with his toothbrush still poised. Then he decided. Although he could not label the difference, never having seen it indexed in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, there was something in their relationship that made her different for him. Whatever her imperfections, he wanted her. With her warmth, her generous earthiness, she was his only alternative to a bleak nothing.

He rinsed the toothbrush and clipped it back on its stand, reaching for the impedimenta of his shaving. Having intended to get swine-drunk that evening after ridding himself of Bradlev, his reappraisal of his attitude to Morag had changed his mind.

He would apologize to her, crawl abjectly if he had to. He shied away from the intruding thought he might find her with another man. The contrition in him replaced his earlier urge to confess. It was a positive purpose to which his mind could cling to in its tangle of irresolution and doubt.

There was nothing he could do about the ravages to his face but he put aftershave balm on it, camouflaged what he could of the remaining smell of whisky and tobacco with a mouthwash and deodorant and dug out a freshly-laundered shirt. If he had to crawl, he would do it in good odour and with a clean collar on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DODSON double-parked his car in Penkhull Street without concealment after checking there were lights showing from the windows of Morag's flat. He walked openly from the car to the door, uncaring of any observation that De Mora might be maintaining.

She opened the door to the length of the safety chain at his

knocking, regarding him without expression through the six-inch gap. Her eyes, unrimmed by kohl, darkened and became wary. He saw she wore a white towelling bathrobe and turban. Her face was pale and naked of cosmetics and she smelt freshly-bathed, the foot he could see in the gap was bare.

He said, 'May I speak to you, Morag?' his voice unusually conciliatory. He made a conscious effort not to slur his words, disciplining his mouth to steadiness.

'If you have to.' She made no move to allow him in.

'May I come inside?'

She thought for a moment. 'If you're not long, I'm getting ready to go out.' She clipped her words, made them brusque. With her hand on the chain, she looked at him sharply. 'You're not drunk?'

'No, I'm not.' He had taken much more whisky than usual but he was controlling its effects.

He stood overcoated inside the door, not invited to sit, while she lit a cigarette with her back to him.

She turned, her face settled to the hardness she had selected for his discomfiture.

'You wanted to say something, she said, her meaning plain, telling him to say it and get out.

He was ill at ease, unhappily conscious of his last visit, trying to fathom her real attitude to him and too much of a policeman to accept the surface mood she chose to exhibit. 'I came to apologize,' he said at last.

She raised her eyebrows. 'Oh? What for?' She sucked at the cigarette, unsteady in her fingers.

Having got the first words out, he floundered on. 'I wasn't fair to you last night. I accused you of something. Well, I don't think I was right.'

There was nothing in her eyes that gave him any comfort. 'You said I was having it off with George Christou.'

He winced. She was sounding like the Lil of his original visit. 'Yes, I'm sorry. It seemed that way.'

'And you know differently now?' She was taunting him.

He didn't. Not for sure. He knew about last night only on the basis of De Mora's cut-short observation. Christou could have returned ten minutes later. He was, Dodson thought, the sort of clumb who would. There were a dozen permutations of sexual opportunity. And tonight. She might be preparing herself to see him again. And not for any solicitor's interview at this hour. Nor to attend a special mass for the success of the arrested Christou's defence. He cursed the cynical mind that tossed up these ulcerating suspicions, that refused to believe in the existence of self-evident truths, that saw always a whorish sexuality in every meeting Morag had with other men.

He temporized 'That you say there wasn't is enough I accept

She cut him off sharply 'That's bloody generous of you, Sergeant Dodson' Two spots of bright colour appeared over her cheekbones 'I'm not saying anything of the sort'

I didn't mean to sound patronizing I'm sorry' He had considered the tactic of moving to her and taking her in his arms But instinct told him that would only invite increased hostility No did he know how he could do so without throwing all his doubts overboard Which was something he still could not do

'Why the sudden change from last night? You wouldn't even listen to me then'

'I've thought about it since I was angry wrong Despite his reservations, he was bleeding inside It was being as painful as he thought swallowing nails would be 'I know about Christou The brother That's what I came to apologize for I'm sorry'

'And that's supposed to make everything all right?' *I'm sorry,* she mimicked him 'I've met so many nasty bastards who think being sorry makes it all right'

'You're making it very difficult for me,' he said evenly

'And shouldn't I?' she flared at him 'After what you said' Her unpainted mouth was suddenly ugly 'You believed George was having something you thought you'd tied your own label to Is that it?'

'I'

She interrupted him, green anger filling her eyes, her voice rising 'I said is that it? Is that what you see in me? An easy fuck?'

A spasm twitched his face, his mouth jerking open in frustration 'You know that's not so You're being bloody-minded'

'Only if you do,' she stormed on furiously as if he hadn't spoken, 'that's easily arranged' With shaking fingers she pulled the belt free of the bathrobe, allowing it to fall open, then holding the sides and spreading them like the white wings of a bird She was naked beneath and, seen without lust, the neat triangle of black hair she displayed at the base of her belly was as unprovocative as a schoolgirl's blue cloth bloomers exposed as a dare

She stepped close to him, her breasts, pale as milk, almost touching his overcoat, looking up at him with an angry goading The open robe released perfume from her body, taunting his nostrils with the warm intimacy of its fragrance

'There you are!' she yelled in his face, pushing her loins against his unresponsive body 'Isn't that what you came for! And what's so bloody special about it!' She was breathing heavily, whipping herself into a fury of bitchiness, her eyes glittering 'And why pick on me? When you can buy as much of it as you want down in Duck Lane if you like it that much

He stepped back from her, his hands in his pockets. Her outburst and flaunting display affected him less than her colder condemnation of his doubts. He tried to read the meaning behind the emotional outburst, letting her venom splash against the rock of his disciplined phlegm, keeping a neutral impassivity on his face but watching carefully for any sudden flailing of her fingernails.

'Cover yourself up,' he growled. 'It isn't doing anything to me.'

She abruptly closed the robe over herself, cocooning her body from his calm regard. 'Oh?' She was still angry. 'And what's so different about what you can give me, Detective Sergeant Dodson? You're not exactly the world's most accomplished lover.'

'No,' he admitted. 'I'm probably not.' He felt a flush of red creeping up behind his shirt collar and he fought against its rising. In his opinion, loving was like driving a car or practising a religion, an activity never a subject for easy criticism. 'I haven't had all the practice I might have had,' he said stiffly. 'Perhaps I should shop around and get some in. It might improve my image.' He turned away from her. He had been prepared to abase himself to a degree but the lower limit had been reached.

Tears glistened in her eyes. 'Where are you going?'

'Duck Lane,' he snapped. 'To get some in. To keep up with the Christians.' Like you said, I can get it anywhere.'

Harry

He looked back at her, his fingers round the handle of the door. She suddenly looked forlorn and lost, the fury of the storm gone from her. 'Wasn't there more in it for you than that?' she asked miserably.

He breathed in deeply through his nostrils. The glimpse of tears had unmanned him. 'Was there for you?' Now that the point had been reached, he wasn't sure his need for her was strong enough to override the barriers of his emotional impotence. It would be easier for him to walk through the door to a kind of sterile independence, to remember her—if he had to—as Christou's cow. He cursed his falling in love with her.

'Yes, damn you.' She blinked back the tears.

'Get dressed,' he said, the compulsion to tell how he felt strong in him, 'and let's stop fighting each other. You know I don't want you like that. I came here to apologize. To tell you . . .' He searched her eyes to make sure he wasn't making a fool of himself, that she wouldn't laugh at him. ' . . . to say I love you.'

She stared at him searchingly. 'That's easy to say too.'

'Not for me.' Visibly it hadn't been. He moved over to her and held her shoulders, kissing her softly on the mouth with none of the greedy fire and muscularity of aroused sexuality. Rather he felt a reciprocated gentle warmth and a strong affection that wrapped them both in a pink velvet euphoria. Her soft breasts

flattened against his chest without challenge or fierceness and her luminous green eyes were inquiring

She sighed and took her mouth away, laying her cheek against his, her breath moist in his ear 'I love you, Harry sweetheart I'm sorry I was bitchy I honestly didn't mean it'

He nuzzled her on her throat 'Forget it'

'But I have to tell you something You don't know everything about me'

'No?' His heart knocked against its rib cage He had visions of armies of lovers and admissions about them he'd rather not hear 'Should I? Is it going to do us any good for me to know?'

'Yes I was arrested this afternoon By De Mora'

He jerked his head to look at her in surprise 'Oh? What for? What's he after now?' Without realizing it, he had aligned himself with her where, before, he would have been unquestioningly with De Mora

'The fur coat, Harry I've been charged with receiving it'

'Handling it, knowing it to have been stolen and dishonestly receiving it,' he corrected her 'And you've been bailed?'

'Until Monday week'

'Where did the coat come from?'

'De Mora said Debenhams' She turned down the corners of her mouth

Dodson recalled the load of furs stolen about two months previously He should have remembered what De Mora obviously had His discomposure burned under his skin over what had been a bad professional *fauv pas* De Mora, not being besotted with Morag's sexuality, would have recognized the coat at first sighting 'How did you get hold of it?' he asked 'From Christou?'

'I bought it from him, Harry You don't have to believe me but I did'

'For?'

'A hundred' She said it into his shirt collar He still held her against himself, her turbaned hair scented in his nose

He wanted to ask her from where she had got her hundred pounds but dared not 'And what was the value entered on the Charge Sheet?'

'I think three hundred and fifty'

'You know you bought it too cheaply for it to be honest, don't you?'

'Yes'

'You've no defence,' he said flatly

'It was a lovely coat, Harry I had to have it'

'Are you denying the charge?'

She showed her astonishment 'Of course Shouldn't I?' That she shouldn't had never occurred to her

'Not if you wish to be honest about it. It isn't just a matter of getting away with it, Morag. Which is what most lawyers seem to think the law is all about. And which is why I have contempt for most of them. It depends entirely on how honest you want to be. And I want you to be honest, Morag. To descend to Mulready's level of dishonesty or to set your own standards.'

'I'm only concerned it shouldn't come between us, Harry.' She was clearly worried.

'If you're only thinking of me in terms of being a policeman,' he said, 'then don't. I've resigned.'

She was surprised again, leaning back and frowning at him. 'Because of me, Harry?'

'No,' he lied.

'Tell me why. You're in trouble?'

He disengaged himself from her. 'You said you were going out. Hadn't you better get ready?' He hoped she was going to change her mind.

'I still have to, Harry. You don't mind?'

'I mind. Of course I do. A man?' He could feel suspicion scratching in the basement of his mind like a small hairy mole.

'Yes.' Her eyes scanned his expression. 'You'll have to trust me, sweetheart. He isn't anybody you need get worried about. I'm having a drink with him, discussing the case against Leo. I'd already arranged it.'

'Christou's brother?' He guessed the answer before she gave it to him.

'Yes.' She moved to him and ran her fingertips softly along the line of his jaw. She lifted her face and touched her lips to his and said into his mouth, 'I'm not sleeping around, Harry. Please don't be jealous.'

'No, I won't be,' he promised, knowing the promising to be the easiest part.

'Will you wait until I get back?'

'How long?'

'An hour. . . an hour and a half. *Please, Harry,*' she coaxed. 'Then stay with me. . . not go away.' There was invitation in the liquid green of her eyes and he felt excitement at the thought.

He looked at his wristwatch. 'I'll come back.' Sitting in her room waiting wasn't anything he'd be likely to enjoy.

She took his hand. 'Come into the bedroom while I put my going-out face on.'

He sat on the bed, watching her doing things at the dressing-table with jars and small phials. With her back to him she watched his reflection in the mirror. 'You were going to tell me why you resigned, Harry. *Please,*' she asked with an intent expression.

'It was nothing more serious than a sudden running out of my

Boy Scout idealism, losing some of my dedication' He cleared his throat It was partly true 'I decided there was no future in the service for me Not with society standing on its stupid head trying to prove the villains are the goodies, the police the baddies' He turned down the corners of his mouth There was a personal reason that came up and I used it to chuck in the job It had to happen sometime They can stuff it so far as I'm concerned'

Using the tip of her little finger she smoothed pinkish-white paste on her bottom lip, regarding him with anxious eyes, not believing him 'You *are* in trouble, Harry You're not the sort to just give in Is it because of what happened here the other night? That De Mora was interested in?'

After a short silence he said, 'Yes,' although not feeling he could be articulate about it Getting the right words out would be like chewing on a bad tooth and it was important to him that he should preserve something of his image with her

'Can you tell me?'

'No'

'Only' She bit her lip and frowned, hesitating over what she had been about to say

'Go on'

She broke off her regard of him, concentrating on the rubbing of pale-blue colouring on to her eyelids 'I wouldn't like want you to be, you know, bent'

He thinned his mouth, frowning 'Ah' We've got round to it at last' He wasn't encouraging

Her hand was raised, her fingers holding the tiny pad of cotton-wool poised 'Are you, Harry?'

'You mean like accepting money to show partiality to garbage like the Christous?'

'Oh, Harry!' She looked unhappy and about to burst into tears

'Aren't you making some wild guesses?'

'Yes But De Mora'

'De Mora's a fool But suppose you're guessing right, Morag It makes a difference? You wouldn't want to know me if I was?'

She resumed shadowing her eyelids, her face blanked off from him 'It would make a difference' The hatred villains had for policemen—for corrupt, buyable policemen in particular—had brushed off on to her 'I love you, Harry It's just that I want to respect you as well'

He wanted to say, *What about Christou? You respected him?* but reminded himself that Christou wasn't a policeman He was supposed to be corrupt, expected to be dishonest and on the take It was he, Harry Dodson, they were discussing and not Christou and her respect was something he needed

He said, 'You'll have to take my word for it Nobody's bought

me' It was the nearest he could get to not actually lying to her What he meant was that he hadn't been bought with money

'Thank you, Harry I'm glad' She smiled at him in the mirror 'Talking of being honest, Morag, what about this statement you made to Mulready? That wasn't true and you know it'

'No it wasn't Have you ever seen a woman who's had acid thrown in her face?'

He nodded Her flesh had looked like half-boiled liver

'I had no option I didn't even hesitate'

'All right, Morag I thought you'd been pressured It happens when you get involved with things like the Christous

She pushed back the stool and left the dressing-table, putting her arms around his neck and straining him to her 'Sweetheart, I love you so much No,' she said as he twisted his face to hers 'Don't kiss me You'll only make me not go at all and I'm already late' She touched his cheek with a dab of a kiss and moved to the wardrobe, throwing off the bathrobe with no show of modesty in the exposing of her body to him

She dressed quickly, putting on dark blue trousers and a kingfisher-blue tunic strapping in her waist with a metal belt Taking off the turban, she combed her hair and adjusted a narrow blue velvet band in it Then she put on a glistening white polythene raincoat of which Dodson didn't much approve It made her look easily available He regarded her glumly, hating the thought of her being with another man

'What are you going to do, Harry?' she asked 'Now you've finished with the police'

He stood and followed in the wake of her freshly applied perfume to the other room, wondering uneasily why she should need to scent herself up to go out and meet Christou's brother

'I'm moving north Possibly tomorrow but soon anyway'

Her eyes were serious Then she looked down at her fingernails 'I see,' she said in a small voice 'Are you asking me to go with you?'

'Yes'

She smiled, showing her pink tongue 'I thought you would What about my bail?'

'You'll come back and surrender it I wouldn't want you bent either'

A car sounded its horn in the street below and she moved to the door 'Take the key, sweetheart, and please be here when I get back' She held his hand and projected her love at him, working her fingers in his and then was gone

He waited until he heard the door slam and the car draw away from the kerb before he switched off the lights and left He suffered a deflating anticlimax, feeling that having told Morag

he loved her there should have been something more to it than her going off for a drink with Christou's brother

He possessed no gauge with which to measure what a woman meant when she said 'I love you' but his cynicism suspected it could still turn out to be a cliché varnishing an acceptable gloss to otherwise shabby things like sexual lust and greed. He made a mental reservation against once more being stamped into the mud by malign fate

But he took the door key with him

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DODSON entered the first bar he encountered on leaving Penkhull Street. The mouse-faced landlord with the thick cigar butt in his face knew him. As did most of the men using the bar. There was the familiar abrupt cessation of the hubbub of conversation as he picked his way to the counter.

He was in breach of his own self-imposed rule that he never visited such a bar for a drink. A thieves' den, tolerated only because it concentrated its share of the dregs of the Crotch together like woodlice under a piece of offal, it had attained the near-inviolability of a sanctuary, entered only in cases of trouble or to put the arm on a wanted man.

The turned faces masked wary hostility or, where a conscience was momentarily untroubled, a barely camouflaged insolence. Dodson kept his expression uncommunicative but his almost casual regard took in and identified every man there, the set of his mouth daring any overt act or audible remark to support their hostility.

He chose an unoccupied end of the counter, hanging by his forearms on the elbow-polished wooden surface. It was a dingy bar, smelling of the previous day's stale cigarette smoke and acid-sour beer slops.

The landlord approached him, his mock-servility an insolence in itself. 'Is everything all right, sergeant?'

Dodson stared him down, knowing him as a man finding the company of criminals congenial. 'A whisky,' he said, his mood gritty.

He watched him push the rim of the glass twice against the optic, draining a double into it. He placed it in front of the detective and smirked. They were watched by fifty appraising eyes.

As Dodson searched in his pocket for change, he said, 'That's all right, Mr Dodson. On the house,' loud enough for the others to hear.

Dodson slapped a fifty-pence coin hard on the counter, his eyes chilling. Menace came from him like a strong smell. 'It isn't all right. *Take it!*' He said it with the same loudness as the landlord but softer when he leaned forward and smiled, whispering, 'Or I'll shove it down your bloody throat.'

The landlord blinked and somebody laughed from the anonymity of the far end of the bar.

The detective pointed to the half-empty beer glass on the landlord's side of the counter. 'You have one with me,' he said, 'on the informants' fund.' It was an order not an invitation and the landlord looked as if he had been hit in the face. He would never come out from under the suspicion that he was Dodson's creature.

Given his change, Dodson, still bloody-minded and ready to take further umbrage, tossed a small coin at him as a contemptuous tip. Then he shut him out of his thinking, preoccupied with a nagging consideration of Morag. She had invaded his system like an addictive narcotic. He felt he had unwisely committed himself by telling her he loved her. The words, remembered away from the situation prompting them, sounded effeminate and maudlin, not any he could normally use without feeling ridiculous. Yet the need he possessed for her persisted against all the evidence of her having been the used mistress of a gangster, of even now being charged with receiving a stolen fur coat. Morag, he realized, had always been Lil. Although preferring her deodorized of the taint and smear of being so, he still wanted her. She was the sort of woman with whom he had always believed he could fornicate and forget. She had proved him wrong and he wasn't liking it. There was a separate and lustless affection for her; he had experienced with no other woman and it bound him closer to her than any expendable desire for her body. Where before there had been a clear and logical difference between affection and his sexual appetites, now the distinction was blurred by what he supposed was love—all improbably combined in the penetrated, slightly over-ripe body, in the not wholly honest mind of Morag.

Jesus Christ! he groaned to himself behind the impassivity, staring unseeing into his unfinished whisky. He might have been encapsuled in galactic space for all he was aware of his surroundings, absorbed and schizophrenic in his trying to rationalize the emotional and physical levels of his infatuation. Somehow he seemed to have lost more than he had gained and he wondered how much the impulse to his resignation owed to a subconscious wish to possess Morag at her own level. Against it, if he could accept what she told him, she was giving him an affection and trust more commonly met with in dogs.

He brought his mind back to the tangibles he could grasp and ordered another whisky. When it came, free of the landlord's earlier misplaced wish to enhance his stature at the detective's expense, he diluted it with water and sipped at it. Billy Hann obtruded into his thinking. Hann was a cold-blooded lawless bastard whose death could only be a gain to society. Parasitic on his adopted country he sucked at its fat, contributing nothing to it but a despoiling wickedness. Dodson couldn't imagine himself regretting his burial or cremation for one microsecond. He could convince himself that whatever happened to Hann that night, society would be the winner. That Bradley might also benefit was the small price society would have to pay for its self-mutilating and ambivalent attitude towards Hann and his like. You couldn't, he argued with himself, clean out sewage without getting some of it on your boots.

And Hann was sewage in anybody's book.

Dodson remembered young Denis Froggatt, the spotter Hann once employed for putting the finger on stealable consignments of goods from the docks. He had been found one night nailed to the wooden planks of a warehouse floor by the loose skin of his arms and thighs, his front teeth pulled from ragged bloody gums by pliers. There were few people in the Crotch who didn't know that Hann's goons had savaged and tortured the luckless Froggatt as a suspected police informer. Which he hadn't been. But it had nevertheless served as a convenient, easy-assimilable example to those interested of the penalty for opposing Hann. And Hann never bothered to deny it. It was profitable for him not to, confident that Froggatt would refuse to identify his torturers, adding one more unpunished crime to add stature to his reputation in the Crotch.

No, Dodson concluded, Hann had put himself outside the law. Let Bradley do what he would with him. There was a satisfying logic, a soothing kind of justice, in believing he should be exposed without the law's protection to the cannibalistic appetites of people like Bradley.

He glared round at the men in the bar. *You bastards!* he wanted to say to them. *I'd like to do the bloody lot of you!*

When he returned to Penkhull Street to check on Morag's return, he saw a Panda car with its familiar yellow-enamelled doors parked behind his own. The constable driver climbed out as Dodson approached.

'I saw your car, sergeant,' he said. 'We've been looking for you. 'Oh?' Dodson glanced up at the flat windows. They were still in darkness. 'What for? There's something wrong?'

'A Reverend Stephens has been trying to contact you urgently

Asking you to call him back at his home He says he's your brother-in-law

Ursula, he thought, suddenly haggard with worry and apprehension She'd told Bill and his submission to Bradley had been for nothing, the agony and the humiliation of his corruption so much useless and wasted emotion He felt a tickle of anger against her

'How did you know my car was here?' he asked

The constable looked uncomfortable, glancing around as if wary of being overheard 'I'm sorry, sergeant,' he said reluctantly 'We've received instructions to report any sighting of you to Mr De Mora'

It was eleven-thirty before he was back in his rooms He drank another whisky to push himself into dialling Ursula's number His mouth was dry with the apprehension he felt While he waited for the connection he cursed Ursula's utter stupidity He couldn't believe Bill would ever forgive him Up shit creek, he thought sombrely, without benefit of paddle and nobody caring a bloody damn Even Morag was requiring him to supply a character reference to prove he wasn't taking bung from Christou The fingers holding the glass trembled slightly.

'Harry!' Bill's voice was tortured anguish 'Harry!' Then the dreadful sound of a man crying

'Bill!' Dodson's chest constricted in an angina of sickening foreboding 'What's happened?'

'Urs Ursula she's dead, Harry I can't believe it they say she killed herself'

He heard the echo of her last sad words to him '*No, Harry It's going to come out I have this dreadful premonition Oh, Harry, dearest*' He should have suspected then Her previous attempt had been much in his mind at one time and he had pushed it aside, willing it not to have existed Bradley had killed her as cruelly and certainly as if he had shot her to death He swallowed, feeling the jerking of a nerve in the corner of his mouth

'What happened, Bill?' His fingers clenched like straining steel claws over the vulcanite receiver

'The train driver saw her, Harry Kneeling on the railway line.' There was a shuddering sigh as he tried to regain control of his voice 'Harry,' he whispered, 'I failed her somewhere She was so unhappy

'No!' Dodson almost shouted the word Not Bill but himself 'You didn't You couldn't Never think that'

'I must have Otherwise it doesn't make sense' He groaned 'The police wouldn't let me see her, Harry They said not . . . not yet'

Dodson's mind shied away from the horror a husband couldn't

be allowed to see. He had seen others and they were things no mind could contemplate without unhinging a little And there would be the baby inside her

'Did she leave a letter?'

His mouth was dry and he swallowed spit, hoping to God she hadn't For Bill's sake

'No . I don't know I don't think so They would have said given it to me '

Dodson could sense his brother-in-law wanted to scourge himself with the guilt of imagined failure in the full abasement of Christian humility If his faith withstood this terrible blow he was either much more or much less than human For Dodson, it was all added confirmation that they were all unconsidered nothings, that what Bill called his God was, in fact, unthinking and capricious fate.

Blood was draining from his face, chilling the flesh and pre-saging the eruption of a blind pale fury He couldn't let Bill go on twisting knives in his conscience He stumbled his words 'Bill there's nothing I can say except pray for both of us.' He hoped the sardonic laugh he thought he heard hadn't in fact been audible 'She's with God now and in His compassion I'll come to you tonight.'

He said it knowing he wouldn't but wanting to give the shattered man something to grasp He closed down blindly, unable to do more to comfort his brother-in-law, unable to exorcize the demon of his own failure from his grief

He sat nerveless, his eyes hot burning holes in his skull, the bitter black anger in him crouched waiting for release While he was blundering goat-lickerish after the carnality of Morag, his sister had been lying crushed and bloody, mutilated by iron wheels, a victim of his failure. Not Bill's but his Big, useless, brother Harry She had finally despaired of his releasing her from the threat of exposure by Bradley and had taken the way out she had tried eight years previously The virus of suicide was never anything but dormant

Soon, he thought, the earth would lie over her and he had betrayed her to it by allowing Morag to deflect him from what should have been an unshakable single-minded purpose to eliminate the threat of Bradley Instead he had temporized, wallowing in the self-pity of his own lesser troubles

Harry Dodson, graduating at last with an Honours Degree in Bungling Ineptitude He saw himself as a lump of unintelligent, misshapen flesh, fragmenting to ruin everything he touched The enormity of his guilt numbed him into a paralysed inaction beyond anything that more whisky could help

Years of uncomprehending time passed as he remembered

Ursula, her memory made poignant now by her death, dancing in repetitive recollection behind his swollen eyelids. He saw her light-haloed in a dreamlike Debussy summer, moving in slow motion and mouthing soundless words from schoolgirl-innocent lips, flickering into shadow as he tried to pin her down against the golden sky and heavy drooping leaves of the remembered background of their childhood. He smelt watermint and bruised meadow grass and saw the luminescent nimbus of her sun-bleached yellow hair. And the soundless words gathered volume until he heard again the pitiful hopelessness of her cry *'It's going to come out I have this dreadful premonition Oh, Harry dearest'* filling his skull and the room until he stood blunderingly, knocking his chair back to fall crashing to the floor.

There was a remote spark of madness in his staring eyes as the vengeful and homicidal Harry Dodson, the one who had stolen the shotgun, took over. Then, with resolve clear cut and undeviating in his mind, he became calm and ice-cold. There were no more troughs of black depression, no high peaks of splashing violence. He settled at the emotional level of a man walking towards a tethered heifer with a captive bolt pistol in his hand.

He retrieved the shotgun from beneath the lid of the typewriter and hinged it open, pushing a cartridge into each of its barrels, stuffing the weapon into the waistband of his trousers. The remaining shells he put into his pockets. All his later self-deluding rationalizations about Bradley had now withered in the loss of Ursula and he deliberately detached his thinking from any consideration of the law's restraints and prohibitions, intending to operate outside them.

He remembered Hann and reached for the telephone, dialling Ferris's home number. His wife answered from her bed, telling him her husband had been called out to a reported shooting a bare ten minutes previously.

When he finally got through the time-wasting obstruction of engaged lines, the Headquarters Duty Inspector said that a hysterical woman had called in earlier from the Foxwell Estate, screaming her head off about a shooting affray involving two dead men, one of whom was her son. She had given no address but Mr Ferris had gone to the kiosk from which the call had been made as had all available cars.

'Get them back. It's a set-up job,' Dodson made his words imperative.

'What do you mean, sergeant? A put-up job?' He hadn't liked Dodson's tone of voice.

'The call was a decoy. To get everyone away from Billy Hann's place in Ashmore Road.'

The inspector bristled his suspicion. 'How would you know? You can't expect me

'For Christ's sake,' Dodson snapped at him. He had nothing to lose and with Bradley so obviously in operation time was more precious than the *amour propre* of an inspector's rank. 'If you don't do as I say you'll lose your bloody pips. So get hold of Ferris and converge all your available cars on Hann's house. It's being screwed at this very moment. And the men doing it are probably armed.'

'Now look here, sergea

Dodson slammed down the receiver, chopping off the squawking fuming words, knowing that for all the inspector's fury he would be left with no option but to contact Ferris. And Ferris, knowing Dodson, would believe, even if he hadn't discovered the falseness of the alarm already.

He slumped into a chair wanting—perhaps even more than justice for Ursula—the peace of total extinction. He felt that it couldn't come soon enough, before his resolve to violence drained completely from him, leaving him spineless and womanish, fit only to hang on to Morag's breasts like a suckling pig at its mother's dugs.

He pulled the gun from his waistband and looked down the terrible black tunnels of its barrels. He put the muzzle in his mouth, tasting the metallic sharpness of the steel and the film of oil on it warm from the heat of his belly. He twisted it upwards behind his teeth, feeling the hardness against the roof of his mouth, pointing it into the vault of his skull. His hand shook and the barrels vibrated against his teeth. Then he shuddered and withdrew it, the metal moist and steaming from his breath, replacing it with dazed eyes behind his waistband. He wanted to cry but stoppered his weakness.

He washed the taste of the gun from his mouth with a whisky he never tasted and picked up his overcoat, walking blank-faced down the stairs like a man going to his death, the barrel of the gun digging into his hip-bone with every step he took.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A SOFT DRIZZLE drained from the clouds hanging over the town like black sponges. Ashmore Road gleamed wet and livid in the cyanosed light of the two lamps illuminating it. The man waving Dodson to a halt wore a tartan woollen dressing gown over his pyjamas, darkened at the shoulders by the drifting rain. The woman stood hunched beneath an opened umbrella, clutching her red bathrobe together at the throat.

The headlights from Dodson's car elongated the figure lying on the footpath, giving it hard-edged and angular shadows, throwing into relief the corrugated soles of the boots pointing to the wet sky. The dead constable's scooter stood propped near him.

Dodson stood over the body, sombre-faced and sick in his stomach. Violent death was following in the wake of his corruption like a dreadful noxious slime. He shivered, feeling suddenly cold. He had left his overcoat in the car and he turned up the collar of his jacket against the rain.

'Are you the police?' the man asked. He was elderly with badger-grey hair and kind eyes. 'You got here very quickly.'

Dodson nodded, wanting to see before hearing, his policeman's brain evaluating the visual evidence. The dead man's helmet and personal radio lay in the gutter at his side. The chilling miasma of death heavy in the air, the terrible unmistakable flaccidity of the body, told the detective more than the small red hole above the bridge of the nose, the speckling of burnt gunpowder grains around it. From beneath the head flowed a sluggish runnel of thick blood.

Dodson knew that for all murder's pitiful bloodiness, some barrister would be briefed to excuse it, finding it in himself to defend the callously cruel snuffing out of a life by twisting and distorting the facts, whitewashing the crime of its horror by innuendo, reducing the killing to a bloodless sentence in a law book, something he could argue into being an accident, an unmeant tragedy, regretted—he could hear the unctuous words—no more bitterly than by the murderer himself.

The woman beneath the umbrella was grey-skinned with shock and she trembled, not taking her eyes from the dead face still settling into the nothingness of total extinction, pimpled now with a fine dew of rain.

'What happened?' Dodson asked. He was dulled beyond any further agonizing self-torture. But the thought came just the same. *I killed this man. Even more than I killed Ursula. The poor, poor bastard.* He recognized him as the youthful Tribble, not long out of his probationary period, still gentle and polite with all the innocence and idealism that had gone sour in Dodson. He hoped Tribble could now see how decent and British he had been in dying at the hands of a gunman without being able to do anything more about it than put up a hand at the car in the approved Number One signalling position and struggle with his radio to call for assistance.

You'll be all right, Tribble, he told him silently. The Home Secretary'll say it proves what a bloody fine police service we have. A lot of genuinely well-meaning people will go to your funeral or read about it in the newspapers and talk loads of crap about your

dying heroically in the finest tradition of the force from a bullet you didn't have a dog's chance of doing anything about Given a gun instead of a wooden stick you might have committed the ultimate blasphemy of shooting a criminal before he shot you Better you should die in a gutter than do that In six months' time you'll be a mess of unrecognizable decay in wet mud and only your parents or whatever girl friend you might have had will remember you for more than a few seconds of morbid recollection And your murderer will go on living Three square meals a day, a warm bed and colour television People worrying their progressive guts out about when he'll be rehabilitated enough to be let outside again But you, Tribble, will be a handful of bones and beetle larvae down in the darkness He worked his mouth as if he wanted to spit You've proved nothing, Tribble, other than to underline how exposed to violence a sick and indifferent society has left you

'I'm sorry,' he said to the man 'I was thinking I asked you what happened'

'He's dead, I'm afraid I'm a doctor

'Yes How did it happen, doctor?'

'We were in bed reading ' He indicated the woman who was still gazing hypnotically at Tribble's face. ' . . . when we heard a car accelerating very fiercely Then it braked and I heard someone shouting—I couldn't hear what—followed by a gun shot Then I think the car drove off again, hitting the lamp-post I heard the metal scraping I looked out from the window and saw this poor fellow lying here The car was gone, I'm afraid I dialled nine-nine-nine and came out to see what I could do Then you arrived almost immediately. . . '

Tears ran silently down the woman's cheeks although her features showed no emotion

'Why?' she asked nobody in particular 'Why do these things happen?'

'Because you don't want your policemen armed' There was a touch of savagery in his voice and she and her husband looked surprised 'You want us to fight hard ruthless men with gentle soft weapons They find it so much easier to shoot at unarmed men and that's what they do What they'll go on doing.' He cleared his throat and stooped, picking up the dropped radio It was dead, not switched on, its aerial not extended He spoke to the man 'You didn't see the car?'

'No. It had gone by the time I looked out of the window' He pointed to a scar of exposed bright metal on a lamp-post and the fragments of glass at its base 'I think that's the lamp-post it hit'

A yellow-doored car pulled into the cul-de-sac, its tyres skidding on the wet tarmac A patrol car followed it Uniformed men in

gaberdine raincoats jumped out and moved over to Dodson, already speaking into the grill of the radio to Headquarters.

'An urgent message,' he said. 'Category Purple One For Mr Ferris And tape it' He waited for the acknowledgement 'Constable Tribble shot dead in Ashmore Road a few minutes ago by two—possibly three—men using unidentified car bearing signs of collision with metal lamp-post on its near side Men known as, one, Wilfred Bradley, fifty-two years, five feet six inches, small plump build, clean shaven, dark brown eyes, thin lips, medium brown wig Wears military style camel-hair coat and smokes orange-coloured pipe Two, Robert Sams, thirty-five years, six feet, muscular, clean shaven, appearance of ex-boxer, crew-cut hair, wears white stormcoat Three, Stanley Doust, twenty-five years, five feet ten inches, big build, clean shaven, straight blond hair, prominent nose, yellow eyes, Cockney accent Wears grey leather coat Sams and Doust known to live at 11 Tickhill Street, South Harbour, and may return there They are dangerous and officers approaching should be armed' That, he thought, with Tribble already shot dead, was underlining the obvious But it would be necessary

He pushed the radio into his pocket and spoke to one of the constables 'Stay here until Mr Ferris arrives Get the story from the doctor Don't touch anything I'm going into the house opposite' He turned to the other constable 'You come with me.' He was little more than an automaton now, doing what instinct told him to do, the cold fire in him primed only to flare up for Bradley

The main gate was open, a ruptured padlock and a pair of boltcutters on the grass inside The porticoed door was closed but unlocked Dodson opened it quietly and, with the constable behind him, waited listening He heard nothing but the far-off ticking of a clock and the soft brushing of rain on the window glass Inside the entrance hall he switched on the lights A wide staircase led to the upstairs rooms and further darkness. Reproduction Georgian chairs with pink satin seats lined the luxuriously appointed hall One had been overturned and a cigar end lay in a burn scar on the carpeting The cords of the two telephone handsets standing on a glass-topped table had been wrenched from their junction box on the wall skirting The rich scent of recently smoked cigar hung in the air

Recalling Tull's plan of the house, Dodson moved to the door at the foot of the stairs and opened it The lights were on in the spacious room, blazing from a huge central crystal chandelier and half a dozen barrel-shaded table lamps Thick saffron velvet curtains kept out the dark wet night. Hann lived in a costly splendour that knocked large holes in the deluding maxim that

crime doesn't pay The knowledge that a callous brute like him should enjoy all the plush fittings and rich fabrics Dodson could see, acquired at the expense of an apathetic society suffering his depredations, was acid in his stomach It almost made palatable the violence he expected to find

The heavy-piled green carpet had been pulled back in one corner from beneath an overturned television set, revealing a two-foot square trapdoor A thick solid piece of wood that wouldn't echo the hollowness beneath when walked on Dodson crouched and hooked a forefinger through the hole in it, lifting it open A smell of damp earth and mould came up from the cellar An aluminium stepladder, bolted to the cellar's brick wall, reached down into the darkness

'Wait here,' he instructed the constable He fitted himself into the square entrance and lowered his legs until his feet found the steps At the foot of the ladder he found a switch and he fingered on the solitary ceiling bulb The cellar was small and lined with skeletal steel shelving On the shelves were large card boxes, some of them with jagged holes torn in them, exposing their contents A row of plastic-covered furs hung from a rail Near them, Dodson could smell the strong odour of moth-killing chemicals

Muffled noises came from the narrow grey-metal filing cabinet against the far wall and the door of it shivered The shelves from its interior were stacked against its sides with an untidy pile of what Dodson recognized as bundled Premium Bonds He twisted the key in the lock and turned the handle

The door pushed out towards him The interior could, with difficulty, have just accommodated a man of Hann's broad build It had accommodated not only him but the woman Margaret as well The two fell out, their faces dusky red, choking at the onset of asphyxia They lay on the floor with chests heaving, their groans alternating with the pumping spasms of their lungs.

Hann was dribbling blood from his vein-scribbled nose His mohair trousers and his blue silk shirt were dusty and dishevelled and he gave off the rank body smell of fear The woman's blonde hair was stuck in the sweat of her forehead The front of her skirt was stained where she had urinated Both looked as if each had fought the other in their endeavours to get out of the cabinet Another thirty minutes and neither would have been able to Shutting them into a virtually airtight cupboard had been a typical Sams and Doust cruelty

Dodson regarded the two with bleak unsympathetic eyes Even in their relief at being released from the metal coffin, it was obvious neither was pleased to see him They needed squashing between the finger and thumb of a just God but Dodson knew they would, as victims of Sams and Doust and with the money to pay

a Queen's Counsel's brief to emphasize it, almost certainly attract sympathy and a light sentence for their own crimes

He beckoned to the constable watching events through the trapdoor to join him 'Handcuff them together when they've recovered,' he said, 'and guard them closely Mr Ferris will want to speak to them very much indeed'

Driving his car from the road he passed Ferris being driven in Ferris stared and then frowned, gesticulating in imperative gestures through the windscreen at Dodson who, refusing to acknowledge he had seen him, turned into the junction, pressing his foot hard down as he accelerated away

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

STANDING IN the deep shadows of the alley at the rear of Elmlea Court, he could identify Bradley's flat from the suffused light leaking from its curtained windows Rain was dropping hard in a splashing deluge, varnishing the streets with its black liquid glossiness, licking at the soot and dust of the grimy brickwork of the building It was past midnight and there were few people caring to use the wet streets

Dodson was still without his coat and the rain waterlogged his jacket and trousers Drops of it soaked through the thick mat of his hair to trickle cold on his scalp He felt his mind to be operating on two levels the upper conscious mind euphorically detached, a thread of an almost prurient expectancy in it as if about to watch his *alter ego* go with a woman On a lower level, he was aware of a darker self, bonehard and implacable with bared teeth, single-minded with a murderous purpose, encapsuled in the darkness of his skin waiting for release Wherever he chose to go, this Siamese twin of promised violence went with him, nudging his footsteps in the predestined groove leading to Bradley

Before moving from the shadows he pulled the gun from behind his waistband and checked the cartridges in its breech, thumbing open the safety catch

A heavily-shaded bulb burned in the entrance hall of the building Nothing moved The porter's vestibule was still empty, the air in the hall dead with the vacuity of non-occupancy A light in the lift showed it to be resting on the ground floor It meant someone was still out

Dodson climbed the unlit stairs to the fourth floor and waited near the lift shaft, a dark silent figure with the night rain still wet on his sombre face, the heat from his body steaming the wetness from his clothing He pressed a button on the operating

Dodson felt his lips shaking, his tongue thick and dry in his mouth. Of the two, he was now the more discomposed. Faced with the flesh and blood and personality of Bradley, the murderous compulsion of the malevolence inside him was frightening, taking control of his breathing and the motor nerves of his muscles.

'You killed a policeman, Bradley.' The words were strangled. 'He's dead?' Bradley frowned, looking in disbelief. It had all the exaggeration of being acted. 'He can't be.' 'You put a bullet in his face.'

'No.' He shook his head vigorously. 'Not me, Harry. I swear it on everything I hold holy. I was in the back seat. That fool Doust.

'You, Bradley.'

'I didn't know he had a gun. Honestly.

'Liar.' Dodson's fingertip touched the ridge of the scar on his forehead. It pained him, showing livid against his pale flesh.

Bradley bared his teeth in a rictal smile that must have come from fear-stiffened muscles. His eyes dropped again to the gun in Dodson's hand. 'It was an accident, Harry. Please believe me.' His throat muscles contracted behind the collar of his shirt. 'He saw us come out and get into the car. He must have suspected something for he waved us down. We guessed he'd taken the number of our car. Sams—he was driving—stopped the car. *Harry, please listen*. I meant to bluff our way through. When he came across to us, Doust had his gun out. Sam shouted at the policeman. told him to stay where he was. He was trying to help him. We both were, honestly. But he came on, taking his radio from his pocket. I think by then he'd seen the gun. Doust was holding. I told ordered Doust not to but he was mad. I tried to pull his arm in and the gun went off. I didn't know the policeman was hit because Sams accelerated then and we hit a lamp-post. . . ' He trailed off, searching Dodson's eyes for belief in what he had said.

Dodson remained silent, waiting for Bradley to say more.

'You've come to arrest me?' He was willing it to be so. Even that to divert Dodson's mind from the violence twisting his face.

'You aren't fit to go on living, Bradley. The law won't do it, so I have to.' The fingers holding the gun tightened. 'Dirty murdering blackmailing filth.' The words ran spittle-sibilant into one another through trembling lips he strove to control. 'And you made me your pump.'

'That's not so, Harry.' He was talking fast. 'I wanted only your friendship. I swear it.' His face projected sincerity and an unexpected simulacrum of almost feminine blandishment. Globules of sweat gleamed on his forehead and scalp. 'I had hoped . . . you and I . . .'

Revulsion stirred in the detective's stomach and he wanted to spit 'You make me sick'

There was a long drawn-out silence, their thinking nearly as audible as the clock ticking from the other room. The tension, brittle and stretched to the point of erupting movement and violence, excited the dark impatient atavism crouched in Dodson.

'Wilfred Alfred Bradley McCann' He felt a need to identify Bradley properly, to use a form of inquisitorial indictment lending a semblance of legality to what he had to do. And he wanted Bradley to recognize the justice of it. His policeman's mind rejected the anarchism of a formless, capricious killing.

Bradley's head had jerked his surprise, his eyes showing white circles. 'Ah! You knew all the time. I underestimated you, Harry.'

'You are charged with murdering Constable Tribble, a police officer acting in the execution of his duty.'

'You're charging me?' There was qualified relief in Bradley's face.

'Yes.'

'Honestly, Harry, I do wish you'd believe me. I didn't know Doust had a gun. I'd no more to do with killing that poor policeman than you. I told you, I tried to stop it. After it happened I left them finished with them.' He dropped his regard to the case in front of him. 'I was going to give myself up, Harry.'

His desperate lying bounced off the impassivity of Dodson's features.

'All right. I wanted to. I suppose I'm just not strong enough. But wanting to because I hate violence. And killing a policeman.

I'm not a murderer, Harry. I gave strict orders.' He searched around for more. 'And then there was you to consider. I couldn't see how you wouldn't be involved. Not that I would involve you,' he added hastily. 'But Sams and Doust.'

He curled the fingers of one hand over the rim of the case. 'There's a fortune in cash in here, Harry. I'm not bribing you,' he said, almost gabbling.

'For the policeman's wife. His parents.'

'You're not talking to a judge, Bradley. Only to the executioner.'

His implacability was chilling.

'You're a policeman, Harry. Even though you have broken into my flat. You see, I know you have. And it was clever of you.'

The smile he forced to his face was a terrible dead one and he stumbled over the articulation of his words. 'But. . . but you still need the original papers, dear boy.'

He thought he could see a way out. He drew a deep breath, willing his stuttering lips to steadiness. 'Forgive me for reminding you, but arresting me won't help your sister.'

There was pleading in his eyes now as he shied away from the threat of the gun. 'Or. . . or killing me.'

Dodson shook his head slowly. He needed to be reminded of Ursula. He recreated his visualization of her kneeling in the path.

of the thundering train, her swollen body obscenely mutilated by the crushing wheels, rekindling deliberately the cold bitterness of his hate for Bradley 'She doesn't signify any more,' he said

'Harry you can't smash things up for her You *can't*' There was desperation in his voice 'I can get the papers tonight And I will you'll have them'

'She's dead, Bradley' The words were flat and without inflexion but each had the impact of a sentence of death

The small man's complexion turned a muddy yellow 'I don't understand'

'She killed herself this afternoon She knelt down in front of a train Because of what you did to her' He swallowed, his throat dry Somebody was breathing heavily, asthmatically, in the room It was himself His eyes felt as if leaking blood He was conscious of approaching the climax, his ejaculation of hate, the darkness inside him filling his skin and wholly controlling him

'Harry' Bradley groaned his anguish, panic staring from his eyes 'Please say that's not'

'That's the second charge against you, Bradley That you unlawfully killed Ursula Jane Stephens by the wilful and malicious torture of her mind'

'You're insane!' Bradley licked his lips to an unpleasant moistness 'That's not a charge'

'It's *my* charge'

'I want to see a solicitor' His eyes hunted the reflected room from behind his heavy-framed spectacles

'The usual hole you slimy bastards crawl into to hide,' Dodson said harshly 'But you're not crawling into it this time She was eight months pregnant, Bradley Was there never any pity in you?'

'I didn't know I couldn't know Not that she'd kill herself'

'I did nothing to her You must have told her yourself.'

That had its effect, rasping at the raw ends of Dodson's conscience, reminding him of his selfish disclosure to Ursula of Bradley's threats

'I did what I thought right,' he finally said 'It doesn't lessen your guilt'

Bradley's lips moved soundlessly, the tendons in his neck prominent The material of his trousers began to agitate as his legs shook His face looked on the verge of crumpling into crying. His hands rested on the edge of the drawer, pale plump spiders of agitation that Dodson watched, careful not to miss the slightest flicker of unexpected movement Even then, the policeman's mind he had now buried noticed the flesh of them free from sores

'Harry I I want to p-pee'

'It won't be necessary' The gun at his side moved slightly

'Harry' Bradley spoke jerkily, his fingers still picking at the

drawer 'Please Don't do it I'll give you Sams Doust They're the men you want'

When he read the answer in the harsh lines of Dodson's face he drew another deep breath, getting his palsied mouth under control His shaking voice parodied a service officer's authoritative brusqueness 'I'm calling your b-bluff, sergeant You can't use that thing You haven't the g-guts I'm going to walk out that door'

'Turn around'

'No! You can't shoot me in the back'

'Turn arou'

With one hand fumbling inside his jacket, Bradley swung swiftly around to face the detective Dodson had a brief glimpse of metallic blue chunkiness in the emerging hand and Bradley's stare of utter intensity before it changed abruptly to wide-eyed terror, his mouth opening in a black soundless hole for the scream that never came

The darkness inside Dodson had already taken over, the gun blindly aimed from his waist, his finger squeezing convulsively on the trigger

The gun bloomed thunderous fire, the muzzle jerking ceiling-wards The upper part of Bradley's skull disintegrated in a raspberry jam ruin of tissue and bone, the body still standing, hesitating as if awaiting orders from the exploded brain, then collapsing heavily against the chest of drawers and on to the floor As Dodson watched, horror now taking over his mind, a brown-irised eyeball slid slowly down the shattered mirror glass in a rivulet of blood

'No,' he whispered 'I didn't mean to' He stared unbelievably at the gun in his hand, a smudge of grey smoke still drifting sluggishly from one of its barrels The darkness inside him had fled like a coward, draining him of violence, leaving him naked and alone again

He started to shake with body-racking spasms

Nobody came pounding up the stairs, he heard no voices raised in alarm The building remained silent If the shot had registered in tired brains, their owners had explained it away and returned to sleep

Controlling the shaking and screwing down his rising nausea Dodson broke the gun, ejecting the empty cartridge case to fall at the side of the body He reloaded the empty chamber and pushed the weapon back behind his waistband

The pistol still held in Bradley's hand was a short-nosed automatic, not throwing much of a bullet He examined it without handling it It was uncocked and Bradley must have known it He could never have expected to do anything useful with it other

than bluff the detective. He crouched and sniffed at the pistol's barrel, checking it had not recently been fired.

He moved quickly now, leaving the bedroom and listening at the outer door, then, satisfied, wedging it closed by man-handling the heavy settee in front of it. Returning to the bedroom he stripped a blanket from the bed, spreading it over the body, hiding from his sight the butchered face with the yellowed pipe-smoker's teeth bared at him.

As he raised himself from the task he saw his features reflected in segments in the broken glass of the mirror. Paper-white and deeply engraved with the lines of strain, his hair plastered to his forehead and his eyes burning from sunken sockets, he looked a man who had been vouchsafed a glimpse of hell. Bradley had had every reason for being frightened.

He poured and drank a stiff measure of the dead man's whisky, careful not to leave fingerprints on the glass. It did nothing for his appearance but dulled the guilt causing it.

He searched the travelling case, not bothering to avoid noise, retrieving the photostat copies of Ursula's marriage certificate, her statement and the newscipping of Bill's preferment. He shredded these in his fingers and consigned them to the liquid swallow of a flushed toilet. The McCann passport he put into his pocket. There was nothing left in Bradley's face to permit his identification as anyone, least of all the dishonourably-discharged Wing Commander McCann. And this was important to Dodson. A resurrected McCann could only lead to Ursula. He need never be so identified unless Ferris chose to check out his fingerprints with criminal records. And that wasn't likely unless there were doubts about his identity as Bradley. Nothing else in the travelling case referred to McCann.

Finished, he pulled the settee away from the outer door and snapped off the lights, walking quickly along the corridor and closing the lift gates. He left by the emergency door in the central area, stepping out on to the iron platform of the escape ladder. The alley below was, so far as he could see in the shadows, empty of everything but dustbins and, at its far end, his parked car.

He descended silently but halfway hesitated, his fists gripping the wet iron uprights, biting his lips in indecision. He had forgotten the cap and cigar stub left there on his earlier visit. His original efforts at misdirecting Bradley's suspicions from himself would now serve only to suggest to any perceptive investigating detective a premeditation to murder. The fabricated evidence he had planted would be examined in the context of Bradley's killing. No detective—and least of all, Ferris—would accept the articles at their face value. And his unlisted number in Bradley's telephone index. He had forgotten that also. It would point

clearly to an association. Perhaps even suggest to Ferris that Bradley had been his informant in the Christou case. The end result could only be a Dodson so entangled in the intricacies of criminal intent and motive that not even a legal trickster like Mulready would be able to help him. Even had he ever remotely considered using the solicitor. He had no intention of denying his killing of Bradley, his only reservation being to keep Ursula's name out of any statement he made. He would, if necessary, allow them to believe he had been bribed. He was masochistic in his need to be punished for what he had done. So, because he knew there would be no defence from him, that there was no going back to that death-filled room, he shook his head impatiently and continued his descent.

In his car he turned in the direction of Tickhill Street, stopping in the centre of the bridge spanning the river. Alighting, he flicked the passport from between his two fingers, sending it skimming into the night to join Bradley's cheque book and credit card in the mud at the bottom of the black water.

Before restarting the motor he extended the aerial of the pocket radio and switched it on. Ferris's voice, hard and angry and made tinny by vibration and faded by distance, came from the diaphragm grill.

get Mr De Mora on for me. last caller will repeat last message. Then a chaos of unidentifiable words and a different voice, excited and gabbling. another shot, sir upstairs with bringing Mr De Mora down. . . ambul fading into hissing and spluttering. Then Ferris's voice again, where you are out instructions. . .

Dodson switched on the engine, drowning the confused babble with the electrical interference of its starting, wrenching the gear lever into its slot and accelerating away, his resolve metal-hard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

TWO UNIFORMED CONSTABLES blocked off the approach end of Tickhill Street where Dodson halted his car. One was bulky in a brown-cloth bulletproof vest over his gaberdine raincoat. He wore a holstered revolver strapped to his waist. A small group of hastily-dressed spectators stood in the rain, held back from entering the street.

Dodson alighted and the armed constable said, 'Careful, sergeant. The bastards are shooting at anything that moves or shows a light.'

The street was in darkness, the bulbs in the lamps broken,

Dodson guessed by Ferris's orders. Three patrol cars and a panda were parked in a line at the kerb. Further vehicles blocked the other end and small groups of men could be seen standing by them. A flood lamp, its glass and lens shattered by a bullet, stood uselessly and unattended on its tripod on the deserted pavement. Although seemingly deserted, the street's doorways held men who kept in the shadows, the pale ovals of their faces turned upwards to the rain-filled sky.

Ferris and a small knot of men sheltered in the angle of a small courtyard. A detective held a revolver aimed upwards at a window high in the tenement building opposite, neutralizing it as a firing point. Ferris, a dark blue haversack slung from his shoulder, was looking at the same window through the rubber eyepieces of a pair of binoculars. A spot lamp attached gave them an unfamiliar bulkiness.

Dodson recognized one of the men—standing apart as if he had been cold-shouldered into keeping his distance—as a local reporter known to listen in to police messages. His immediate presence would inhibit Ferris's freedom of action. He would feel like a general fighting a battle covered by television cameras.

Tension was strong in the atmosphere and a feeling of waiting on violent events. Ferris, Dodson guessed, could be intending sitting it out or waiting the initiative from elsewhere. If Sams and Doust were holed up in the top rooms there was no obvious way out but down. And that meant a gun battle, with Ferris being limited to a flabby kind of action by his need to arrest both men without—if remotely possible—bloodshed, to avoid the searching accounting which would follow any fatal use of police firearms. It wouldn't be long, Dodson thought bitterly, before somebody in his nice safe bum-warming Whitehall office dreamed up the use of foam-rubber bullets by the police on such occasions as this.

The detective walked quickly towards the courtyard and Ferris took the binoculars from his eyes. He frowned when he recognized Dodson.

'Don't stay out there,' he snapped. 'You'll get shot.'

As Dodson turned into the yard, Ferris took a radio from the uniformed inspector near him and spoke into it. 'Hello, Bartlett. A report on Mr De Mora, please.'

He looked at Dodson as he said it, emphasizing that this was for his information as well.

Bartlett's voice came strong from the diaphragm. 'He's comfortable, sir, but still bleeding.'

'Keep him quiet. The doctor's due any moment. He'll be walking and approaching your side from the Common Street end.' He pressed the speaker button twice. 'Sergeant Dennis? Are you receiving me?'

'Sir?' a fresh voice answered, sounding a little farther away, more muffled by intervening walls

'What is the situation up there?'

'As before, sir No sighting but we can hear them banging away on something They may be breaking down a wall, sir But nothing since the last shot' There was a short pause 'I think while they're doing it would be a good opportunity to rush them, sir' He sounded eager, anxious to try

'No you can't, sergeant,' Ferris said shortly, not considering it 'Stay where you are Some tear-gas grenades and reinforcements are on the way' He handed the radio back to the inspector 'The Thermopylae Pass blocked by shit,' he commented bitterly to nobody in particular, a rare excursion into obscenity for him 'I'd like to chuck in a stick of gelignite *That*,' he snapped at the reporter, 'isn't for quoting'

The rain gusting in on him seemed not to have affected the crispness of his immaculate shirt nor the brilliant lustre of his shoes But dust and whitewash smears on his raincoat indicated to Dodson his senior had spent some of his time in the tenement opposite

He turned to Dodson, glaring at him with a hawkish unfriendliness, his nostrils pinched and narrow 'Come over here,' he said, moving away to the other end of the yard 'I have things to say to you'

Dodson followed and stood waiting, his back to the other men, not concerned by the rain falling on him

Ferris took in the detective's soaked clothing, his lack of a coat and the haggardness of his features 'Are you all right? You look ill'

'I'm all right' He discouraged further inquiry about himself

'You've some explaining to do,' Ferris said 'The absence of the courtesy 'sergeant' was noticeable 'These are the men who killed Tribble?'

'Yes'

'You know? Or think you know?'

'I know They aren't up there shooting for any other reason'

'I won't ask you how you happen to know but when I do you'd better have a satisfactory explanation' Ferris's attitude was chilling and hostile, his rejection of Dodson's loyalty unconcealed 'Are all the three you circulated up there?'

'No Sams and Doust only'

Ferris checked with a piece of paper he took from a pocket 'You know them personally?'

'I know of them'

His lips tightened 'But no report for Intelligence No mention of them to me.'

'No' Dodson had no interest in defending himself

'You know they've also shot Mr De Mora'

'I heard you talking about it' Ferris was wasting time but he had to stick with him to get what he wanted. 'Badly?'

Ferris looked mean 'Bad enough I hope it doesn't stick in your gullet'

'I told you where they were, warned you they were armed and dangerous' Ferris's antagonism wasn't important now and he had sufficient on his conscience without adding De Mora's wounding to it He suspected the ambitious inspector of going in against the more cautious Ferris's instructions

'I know you did To your credit,' he conceded grudgingly 'But I'm left wondering why That and how you came to be at the scene of Tribble's murder before anyone else And where you've been to since How you came to know the nine-nine-nine from Foxwell Estate was a phoney . No" He said sharply when Dodson started to answer him 'When I ask you it'll be in my office' The indictment was going to be a formidable one 'Where's this man Bradley you mentioned?'

'You don't have to worry about him

'I asked you where he was'

Dodson had a mental picture of the blanket-covered form waiting on the bedroom carpet, mute and cooling in its progress to corruption 'You'll find him at Elmlea Court, Lampett Street Flat eighteen'

'He's armed?'

'He'll go quietly,' Dodson said grimly

'You're sure?' The narrow face had lost none of its suspicion of him

'I'm positive'

Ferris snapped finger and thumb at one of the detectives wearing a flak jacket and gun 'Take a constable with you, Jackson, and go to Flat eighteen, Elmlea Court, Lampett Street, in B Division You'll find the Bradley man there' He kept his words low, not intending the reporter to hear 'You've got his description?'

Jackson nodded, impatient to be off.

'Bring him in And be careful Sergeant Dodson says he isn't armed' He made the last sentence echo his disbelief without changing the inflexion of his voice

Dodson felt resentful anger tighten the flesh of his face 'I said there'd be no trouble,' he growled, suddenly aggressive

Jackson glanced at him curiously and moved away

'I hope you're right,' Ferris said Then, he added softly, so softly that Dodson almost didn't hear him, 'I'll dig a grave for you if you're not'

Dodson swallowed his aggression 'Sir,' he said, 'let me go in

after them' For him, there needed to be bullets flying and action This waiting and watching was a negation of the putting to an end the menace of Sams and Doust He had no patience with investing a strong point, ringing it with men and equipment and sitting it out That Ferris could wait outside and direct operations, that he could even talk instead of storming in before it was too late, was anathema to Dodson

'No' Ferris hadn't given his request a second's deliberation He added cruelly, 'I don't want any more of your personal grand-standing'

Dodson felt the flush rising to his face 'That wasn't in my mind I think I could persuade them to'

'I imagine you might,' Ferris cut him short, his sneer unconcealed 'You want a gun, I suppose? Or do they trust you enough for you not to need one?'

'Unless you want me shot as well' He wanted to smash Ferris's obstinate face in yet couldn't fairly blame his attitude.

'I want nobody shot if it can be avoided Not even you The answer's still no' He glanced across the street at the tenement The silence from it promised no comfort to anyone 'In any case, rushing them is impossible That's how Mr De Mora got himself shot They cover the stairs at the top and they can't be taken without losing somebody in the process I know,' he added 'I've been up there You haven't'

'I'm familiar with these buildings, sir I may be able to get in from the roof'

'Don't be stupid That's been considered and it's impossible Either by you or anybody else I'm doing this my way The proper way'

Dodson thought, 'The proper way. The decent sporting way' Ferris was equating his problem of winking Sams and Doust out with knocking on somebody's front door, not on a Sunday of course, with a properly signed summons in his pocket It mightn't be successful but it would accord with official policy And that was what mattered very much when you had a high rank to support

'May I look through your glasses, sir? I might just see another way in.'

'There isn't'

'Please, sir' He had to get away before Jackson found Bradley's body and radioed back

'No'

'Sir, I won't ask anything else'

His urgency swayed Ferris who passed him the binoculars reluctantly 'Get a move on I've things to do'

Dodson took the combined binoculars and spot lamp still

attached by its cables to the haversack slung from Ferris's shoulder and looked through the eyepieces. He depressed the trigger and aimed the contraption with its invisible beam of infra-red light at the upper floor of the tenement.

The window with the broken glass leapt at him, wobbling in the shimmering circle of bluish-green radiance thrown by the black light and returned, converted to luminescence by an electronic tube. He could see clearly the detail in the framework of the window and the screening material hung behind it. Next to it was a door and past that another window, all with access on to a common balcony. There was no visible movement. He moved the circle of light, running it along the steep glistening wet roof slates and the streaming guttering, over ledges too narrow for a small pigeon to roost on, then on to the adjacent buildings sharing the line of roofs. A rock climber with steel fingers might traverse the face of the buildings comfortably enough in daylight. In the darkness a climber, distracted by the driving rain and wind, could as easily find death waiting for him on the flagstones below.

Dodson passed the binoculars back to Ferris. 'Thank you,' he said tonelessly.

Ferris was suddenly belligerent again, regretting allowing him their use. 'Now get to hell out of here before the Chief Constable arrives,' he snapped. 'He won't regard your being here as particularly desirable. As I don't. You're not on duty and I don't want you to be.'

'I'm going.' *The next time I see you*, he thought, *I shall be charged with murder*. He wondered what it felt like to be at the receiving end of a CID investigation.

'Don't interfere any more, do you understand? I'm at a stage where I'm not far off ordering your arrest. Report to me at my office at ten tomorrow morning.' Ferris turned his back on him abruptly and rejoined the other men, touchy with the need to make decisions.

Retrieving the radio from his car, Dodson returned to the street on the opposite side to that on which Ferris was stationed. Without pausing, he entered the building next to that occupied by Sams and Doust. The constable occupying the hallway recognized him and stood aside, allowing him to mount the stairs he had been guarding.

When there were no more stairs to climb, Dodson flicked on his cigarette lighter, seeking by its tiny flame a door to the front part of the building. Finding it and discovering it to be secured, he kicked the sole of his shoe against the lock, springing it open.

Inside, the room was empty of furniture and squalid with the smell of damp wood and mice droppings. He could hear faintly

the vibrations of an irregular thudding coming from somewhere in the block. He opened a window and leaned out, looking down into the street far below, seeing the tiny fore-shortened figures of Ferris and the others in the angle of the yard. Rain beat on his face, cooling it from the heat of his long climb up the stairs.

Pulling out the aerial of the radio he cut across a situation report by pressing the switch several times.

'Calling Chief Superintendent Ferris,' he said into the microphone, keeping it close to his mouth. 'Are you receiving me?'

There was a pause then Ferris's voice, irritated by the interruption, came clear. 'Receiving you. Identify yourself.'

'This is Sergeant Dodson.' He emphasized his rank. 'I've put myself on duty and I'm calling from the building next to the FZ.' He kept his thumb on the speaker button, preventing Ferris from answering. 'I'm going in from outside. You hear me?' He said it more matter-of-factly than he felt and released the button.

He saw Ferris's face as a lighter blob in the shadows as he looked upwards. When he answered his voice rose angrily. 'I'm ordering you to come down, Dodson. Do you hear? You are under arrest . . .'

Dodson placed the radio on the floor, leaving the voice talking to the empty room, straddling the window sill. A fall-pipe, rough with flaking black paint and scaling rust, ran past the window. On the other side of it, about a yard away, was another window; then a second fall-pipe with a branch pipe running from it and rising, slanting, to the roof guttering. The guttering continued along the roof's edge for several feet to where it overhung the small cement platform railed off from the long drop by flimsy-looking iron curlicues more ornamental than protective. This balcony gave access to the door and two windows he had seen through the binoculars. The farthest window was the one hung with a blanket curtain.

He jammed his gun further down inside his waistband and leaned sideways, grasping the fall-pipe with both hands. His fingers just fitted between pipe and wall and he swung himself into space, his toes scrabbling for enough purchase on the brickwork to take some of the weight of his body from his hands. He hung there, his wrists creaking, his shoes holding by the friction of the leather. He swung a leg sideways, groping blindly for the next window sill, seeing dimly that the glass was broken in the upper pane. His toe scraped on the sill and he held the front inch of it on by pressure.

It was necessary now to transfer his weight to that leg, to release his grip on the pipe and to grab hold of the window frame before he lost balance. It could be done as an act of desperation. If he slipped on the wet sill or his fingers missed the framework, he would topple backwards into the street below. The dark night air

seemed to have weight itself, to press in on him, threatening to tear loose his grip on the pipe even before he hazarded the traverse

He looked down between his wide-apart legs, saw the upturned faces in the appalling gulf beneath and terror scrambled for room in his mind as vertigo seized him He squeezed his eyelids shut and fought it, sweat starting from his forehead, a pulse banging in his throat and wrists A sudden sickness chilled his skin and faintness drained blood from his brain He unwillingly visualized the horrible twisting fall, cartwheeling bloodily to the flagstones, his thighbones being driven into his belly, his skull spilling his brains in the wet street He opened his eyes to blot out the mental images with the solid reality of the brick inches from his nose

In none of his fear was there a place for drawing back, for an abandonment of his purpose In his implacable mind, punishment followed guilt as surely and rightly as pain followed injury And what he was doing was in some measure a punishment, a penance, a scourging of his murderous flesh, a purging of the corruption he believed to be in him So, in a sense, he welcomed the danger and his fear, accepting almost suicidally its fatal consequences should he fall

From his right he heard a shot and shout of alarm He jerked, sucking in air, thinking he had been fired at But the window remained blank He lunged sideways for the broken window, his left foot making the sill to join the other, his hands groping frantically through the broken glass for the frame His hooked fingers found and clung as he crouched double, balanced on his toes, his kneecaps pressing against the creaking glass of the lower frame He fought the gravity pulling his body outwards as he had fought his fear and sickness, breathing heavily, his features impassive and showing nothing He had cut the fingers of one hand on shards of glass remaining in the framework and blood made his grip slippery and insecure The calves of his legs were corded with the strain, the muscles of his arms aching and trembling with the anchoring of his heavy body. He thought he heard someone shouting from below but dared not look again

He edged his feet along the sill to the extreme edge and released one hand, the bloody one, reaching sideways for the second fall-pipe. His fingers found it and curled around its roughness, pulling at it, testing its adhesion It jerked in his grasp but resisted further movement He let himself fall diagonally towards it, clutching at it with both hands, feeling the jolt of it in his belly as his dropping body was stopped abruptly by the strength of his wrists The pipe groaned and moved against its fastenings, sagging fractionally outwards from the wall, then holding steady. He rested, waiting for the heart hammering in his chest to slow down

When his searching feet found a narrow purchase on a pipe

bracket, he pulled himself up to the angled pipe leading to the guttering, kneeling on its hardness and taking the strain from his arms. His breath whistled bronchitically in his throat and he smelt his body sweat. He was now crouched sideways, balanced against the wall, his cheek feeling the roughness of the bricks, using the adhesion of his wet clothing to help him stay there. The rain still beat on his flesh with a thousand invisible needles of discomfort. His waterlogged jacket hung on him, heavy as metal and clammy from his body heat.

He raised an arm, feeling for the guttering above him. With his fingers hooked over its rim he put weight on it, testing its strength. He thought it would hold him but the edge was sharp. He brought back his arm and manœuvred a handkerchief from his pocket, using his teeth to bind the bleeding fingers.

Despite the eyes he knew must be watching him from below he felt as alone, as solitary, as he would on the vertical rock face of the Eiger. The sounds reaching his ears were few—the harsh wheezing of his own breathing, the rasp and slither of his clothing against the rough bricks and the repetitive thudding, muffled by intervening walls but growing louder.

He reached up and grasped the guttering with both hands, grunting with the effort of pulling his body away from the pipe and swinging out into space, hanging dead-weight by his fingers. The guttering held but the rim of it, sharp as cat's teeth, bit holes in the fleshy pads of the fingers of his one unprotected hand. He moved it sideways painfully, sliding the left to join it, moving jerkily with muscular contractions of his trunk, hurrying to anticipate the dying of his strength.

He felt the guttering move and his heart lurched in his chest. It tilted towards him, pouring a cascade of dirty water and slime on to his upturned face and down the sleeves of his jacket, chilling his sweating body with its sudden onslaught. He choked and coughed his throat clear, his legs thrashing wildly for the balcony rail he knew must be near him. One toe kicked metal and found lodgement. He hung panting, his eyes engorged from his efforts. He now forced his spent strength to drag his body the remaining few inches, allowing him to drop exhausted on to the cement floor beneath, crouching immediately, waiting for any indication that he had been heard.

Ferris would have been watching his progress through his night-vision glasses. He would be policeman enough to ignore the fact of Dodson acting against his orders and to organize whatever protection and support he could. But not, Dodson hoped, to the extent of sending the men in. He wished he had kept the radio to find out.

The banging, clearly coming from inside the room occupied by Sams and Doust, also bothered him. He stood, not looking in the direction of Ferris and the others, removing the gun from his waistband. He peered in the first of the windows, seeing nothing but darkness. He tried the handle of the door, meeting the solid resistance of a lock. Beyond it was the window with the broken glass and screening blanket. A faint seepage of light came from between its fibres. Listening, he could hear the rumble of voices, growling in dispute like hyenas with a corpse. Then Doust's voice, clearly, 'Well, for Christ's sake put a jerk innit, Bob,' and the renewal of the banging he had already heard.

Returning to the first window, he slid it open with all the slowness of the moving minute hand of a watch. He mounted the sill, moving as slowly into the room. He snapped his lighter into flame and looked around him. Two disordered unmade beds, a plywood wardrobe and a grimy carpet completed the furnishings. The room stank of male flesh and stale beer. Before extinguishing the flame, he noted the position of the door.

Back in darkness, he stood with his fingers grasping the handle, trying from the disorder of his mind to define his intent. Even at that moment, the gun in his hand, he was uncertain of what he would do, of what his *alter ego* might impel him to. These were desperate men with nothing to lose and all to gain by further violence. But equally men who might choose to surrender whenever they considered their own lives to be in danger.

He was wholly Detective Sergeant Harry Dodson now, putting everything else from his mind but the problem of the two men inside.

He opened the door silently. Sams was standing on a table in the centre of the room stabbing upwards with a steel case-opener, enlarging a hole in the plaster and lath ceiling. White dust covered his crew-cut hair and streaked his shoulders, the air around him thick with what looked like a haze of talcum powder. A small revolver rested on the table at his feet. He froze when he saw Dodson, the bar held aloft in his hands. 'Stan' he called urgently, not taking his eyes from the detective.

Doust had been standing inside the far door, a pistol in his hand, watching the well of the stairs outside. He swung around when he heard Sams, his yellow eyes widening, aiming his weapon at Dodson's stomach. A cheroot hung carelessly between his lips and rivulets of sweat ran down the creases of his nostrils. He still wore his mouse-grey leather coat.

Dodson held his gun at his side, looking at Doust's face and ignoring the pistol.

His astonishment brief, Doust smiled his thick-lipped nasty smile. There was no fear in his face. 'Sergeant-fuckin'-Dodson!'

He said it with an almost affectionate sneer as if meeting an old but despised friend, the cheroot remaining in his mouth 'Our bent bleedin' copper' He walked across to Dodson, the nose of his pistol describing tiny circles in the air but remaining aimed at his stomach

He stopped close enough for Dodson to have hit him, peering over the detective's shoulder 'On your own, eh? Christ,' he whispered, 'I've been waitin' for you, mate You ballsed the job up Put a copper on to us' His voice sharpened 'Ow'd you get in 'ere?'

Dodson's dishevelment, his bloody fingers and waterlogged clothing gave Doust the answer 'You stupid bastard You climbed in like a bleedin' monkey'

'Put your gun down, Doust'

'You're jokin'' He showed his teeth, looking incredulous 'I'm goin' to shoot your bloody guts out with it'

Sams spoke 'No, Stan Enough's enough Let's get out of here while we can'

Dodson experienced a numbed indifference to fear, knowing he should feel frightened but having it no longer in him

'Don' worry, Bob,' Doust said contemptuously, his eyes never leaving those of Dodson 'E can't do anythin' 'E's too bloody bent Bradley's tame ponce'

'I am a police officer on duty

Doust spat at Dodson's feet He sneered, his mouth slack, speaking to Sams without turning his head 'Ain't that fuckin' 'ole big enough yet?'

'You won't be using it, Doust,' Dodson said levelly 'Neither of you I'm arresting you for the wilful murder of Constable Tribble'

Doust widened his smile 'Jus' like that?' His voice rose, spittle collecting in the corners of his mouth There was a butcher's implacability in his eyes 'Now ain't you bein' fuckin''

'Put your gun down

Dodson brought his own gun up from his side, measured and without haste, as Doust fired The detective felt the bullet hit solidly into his stomach like a punching fist, then heard the crack of the explosion He shook like a tree struck by a thunderbolt and fought to stay on his feet He heard another explosion and felt a stinging burn sear his arm

The barrels of his gun were now pointing at Doust's face and death stared at the blond man from the twin black holes Doust opened his mouth, his fear-paralysed finger trying to obey the impulse sent from a brain already recognizing it to be too late

In the second before Dodson pulled back on the trigger he saw the option open to him, knowing he could kill Doust and justify

doing so, seeing also in the man at the other end of his gun the filth that had raped Morag, the sadist who had drilled a hole in Christou's arm and who had finally shot and killed Tribble and wounded De Mora, a total villainy exuding cruelty in streaks of unforgivable viciousness. He *had* to be better dead.

With his option untaken, Detective Sergeant Dodson, acting in the exercise of his duty, dropped the muzzle to Doust's ankles and felt the bang and recoil, smelling the acrid smoke of the exploded gunpowder. Strength finally drained from him and he sat simultaneously with Doust's fall, pain stabbing with red-hot needles in his belly.

Doust flailed his bloody, bone-splintered legs, thrashing his body and beating his fists on the wooden floor, screeching like a butchered pig. His pistol lay where he had dropped it, the third shot unfired.

Dodson twitched his gun feebly at Sams standing immobile on the table.

Sams, his leathery face shocked, licked his lips. 'Don't do it, Mr Dodson.' The bar dropped from his nerveless hands.

'Stay where you are,' Dodson whispered. He felt at his belly with his free hand, then examined his fingers, not finding any blood. He thought he must be bleeding inside. A black veil hung between him and Sams. He called out then, weakly at first but stronger and stronger until he was shouting in a hoarse voice and men came running up the stairs and into the room.

He relaxed his fingers from the intolerably heavy gun he held pointing harmlessly, although he was unaware of it, at the legs of the table on which Sams still stood. The pain in his belly intensified in jagged surges of increasing agony as if sharp teeth were tearing at his intestines. He saw the ceiling and walls slip crazily away and felt the floor hitting his shoulder-blades and then the back of his skull. Hands held his head and something soft pushed between it and the floor. The black veil thickened. Whatever he'd done before, he thought, he'd finished up like a true copper, getting his bloody backside shot off in the best traditions of the service. He was lucky. He could so easily have been killed like Tribble. Then he would never have seen Morag again. He put fingers to his belly. It now felt as if a fire had been lit on it. He groaned deep in his chest. Morag! He wanted Morag. She was waiting for him. If he didn't get there she might be off again with that bastard Christou. And he had to have her to protect him from his terrible loneliness. His heart beat thunderously, pulsing in his ears like wild waves. Words came from behind him; tiny echoing words but just reaching him. 'I think he's dying, sir.' Then Ferris's voice, still angry. 'Shut up, you bloody fool.' They were talking about Doust. But surely not dying from being shot.

in the legs. He would have to explain that. He stirred and groaned again, turning his head sideways and seeing immaculate trouser ends, lilac silk socks and beautiful shoes, glossy even through the thickening veil. Ferris's voice came again from miles and miles above him. 'Can you hear me, sergeant?' That 'sergeant' was wonderful. He tried to nod and coughed doing it, feeling something fluid obstructing his throat. Ferris would understand, he knew he would. Everything was going to be all right. He felt light-headed, suddenly free of the oppressive weight of guilt he had carried with him for days. He managed to gasp, 'I . . . I want to make a statement . . . ' not finishing but feeling happy he had statted on his confession, the cleansing acknowledgment of his corruption, getting things off his mind. Perhaps to start again with a clean sheet. And Morag.

He was thinking of her when suddenly he was back in the rain, clinging on to the iron guttering, his fingers aching and pain clawing at his belly. He decided to let go, to drop his lonely fall into the black gulf beneath him.